WESTERN Adventures

FEB. '42

A STREET & SMITH PUBLICATION

RIDERS OF TERROR RANGE

Gripping Range-Mystery Novel By Cliff Farrell

●

Lane-Steele-Heckelmann And Others

ALL STORIES COMPLETE

FEB. 1942 10c

NOTE HOW LISTERINE GARGLE REDUCED GERMS

BEFORE

The two drawings illustrate height of range in germ reductions on mouth and throat surfaces in test cases before and after gargling Listerine Antiseptic. Fifteen minutes after gargling, germ reductions up to 96.7% were noted; and even one hour after, germs were still reduced as much as 80%.

AFTER

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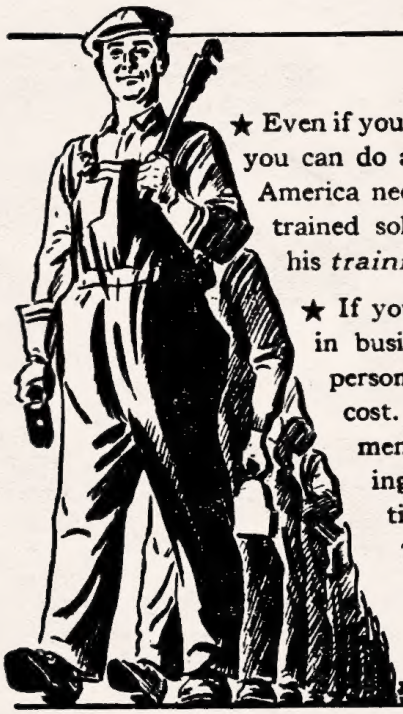

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ADV—1N

WESTERN Adventures

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NEXT ISSUE ON SALE WEDNESDAY FEBRUARY 4th 10c per COPY

All stories in this magazine are fiction. No actual persons are designated either by name or character. Any similarity is coincidental.

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The Home Trail

CHARLES N. HECKELMANN, who's making his first appearance in Western Adventures this month, says that he's been writing ever since he was big enough to hold a pencil. After graduating from Notre Dame *maxima cum laude*, he did a stint as feature writer on a New York newspaper, covering every sport from curling down to baseball and football. Naturally enough, that led to his writing several novels with a sports background. For relaxation he began to read Western stories, and eventually the thunder of guns and the fog of powder smoke got into his typewriter. "Boom-town Buckaroo," which you'll find on page 48, is the result. Hope you'll like it.

Peter Brant, of Temple, Texas, takes us to task pretty severely in the following letter, and we wonder if many other people would like to hand in a similar complaint. This is what Pete has to say:

Since I enjoyed most of the yarns in my last W. A., maybe I'm splitting hairs in criticizing "Seal Hunters Savvy," but I don't think this type of fiction has any place in a Western magazine. I like an occasional story about the Northwest and logging, but when you get as far afield as Alaska and the ice fields and seal hunting, I think it's about time you looked at a compass and found out how far you are from your own stamping grounds. Stick to stories that bear out the title of your mag, and everybody will be happy.

Now that I've got that complaint off my chest, I guess I ought to come through with a word of praise for the story I liked best in the last issue. It was "Trail Sign For The Law," by Mojave Lloyd—a swell combination of rip-snorting action and humor. Let's have more like it.

We can assure you we'll take your criticism to heart, Pete, but since the mailbag brought in several other letters sent by folks who seem to enjoy "off the trail" yarns like "Seal Hunters Savvy," we're in a bit of a quandary. The only thing to do, we reckon, is work hard to give you the kind of yarns you enjoy, and hope you won't hold it against us if once in a while, we wander off our stamping grounds.

Harry Swanson, of Jamaica, New York, sort of apologizes for the fact that his first letter to us is a "squawk," but we guess we can bear up under it. Here's what Harry has on his mind:

Guess it's not hardly fair when you've been getting as much entertainment for

your money as I have by reading Western Adventures for the past year or more, to squawk about something in the very first letter you write. But that's the way it goes, I guess. People sound off more about what they don't like than what they do. Now, take me, I like everything in Western Adventures from cover to cover, can't find a thing wrong with what I find there. So, what do I do? I squawk about what I *don't* find there. And I'm referring to those swell poems by S. Omar Barker. Soon as I open Western Adventures, I look for his name first. And when I don't find one of his down-to-earth cowboys reflectin' on life, I feel as though I've just missed meetin' up with a good friend. I'm no lily who likes ordinary poetry, either—don't get me wrong. It's just that it seems to me that S. O. B. gets "behind" the real West in these homely philosophies of a workin' cowhand, and that's what gets me, I guess. I've never been farther West than Hoboken, as we say in the East, but more than in any story I read, I get a feeling when I read a Barker poem that here're the men who made the West. I'm making a collection of these Barker poems, and it sure would add to my dime's worth if I could look forward to one in every issue of Western Adventures. But maybe I oughta add, that Barker or not, I'm still a satisfied customer!

Reckon most folks agree with Harry that Barker's poems are tops in their field. Unfortunately, we can't promise to include one in each issue, but we'll sure do the best we can in that direction.

Cass Durocher, of Scranton, Pennsylvania, calls himself a "rocking-chair" cowboy, but his letter shows he has plenty of savvy. He writes us to say:

I've yet to read a story in Western Adventures that I didn't enjoy thoroughly, but it's a long time since I've come across a mystery. Hope you'll schedule one soon. Something else I'd be glad to see in the magazine is a department about the West. That would sure go over big with rocking-chair cowboys like myself.

W. A. has been my favorite magazine ever since I bought my first copy over a year ago, but I keep wondering why it doesn't come out more often. Two months is a pretty long time to wait for a magazine you enjoy. By the way, I sure like the covers on the last three issues—they're a lot more distinctive than the ones you used to have.

If you'll turn to page 9, Cass, you'll find "Riders Of Terror Range," by Cliff Farrell, a mystery yarn that we hope will keep you glued to your chair with suspense. And maybe one of these days we'll be able to do something about the other two suggestions you made.

Here's a reader from Minneapolis, Minnesota, who's been reading Western Adventures for some time, but has never before dropped in at The Home Corral. Mrs. Annette Randall writes:

I've been reading your magazine for quite a while and getting plenty of enjoyment out of it, too, but a story has to be really outstanding to make me want to sit down and write a letter about it. "Doom Trails A Buckaroo," by Ed Earl Repp, in the December issue, is the yarn that made me get out my pen and ink. I don't usually go for stories in which a coward turns into a hero overnight, but I could certainly sympathize with Lynn Kirby in this yarn, and believe in his struggle to win the respect of his crew. I think stories like this are a real inspiration and set a good example for the young people who read your magazine.

That's a right nice pat on the back, Mrs. Randall, there in your last sentence. That's one of our objects in picking yarns for Western Adventures—to have them clean, wholesome reading that presents an exciting picture of outdoor life with its natural hazards and man-made problems that have to be met and overcome by upright, courageous characters.

Learning Radio at Home Jumped My $17 a Week Pay to $45

BY G. A. M.

(NAME AND ADDRESS UPON REQUEST)

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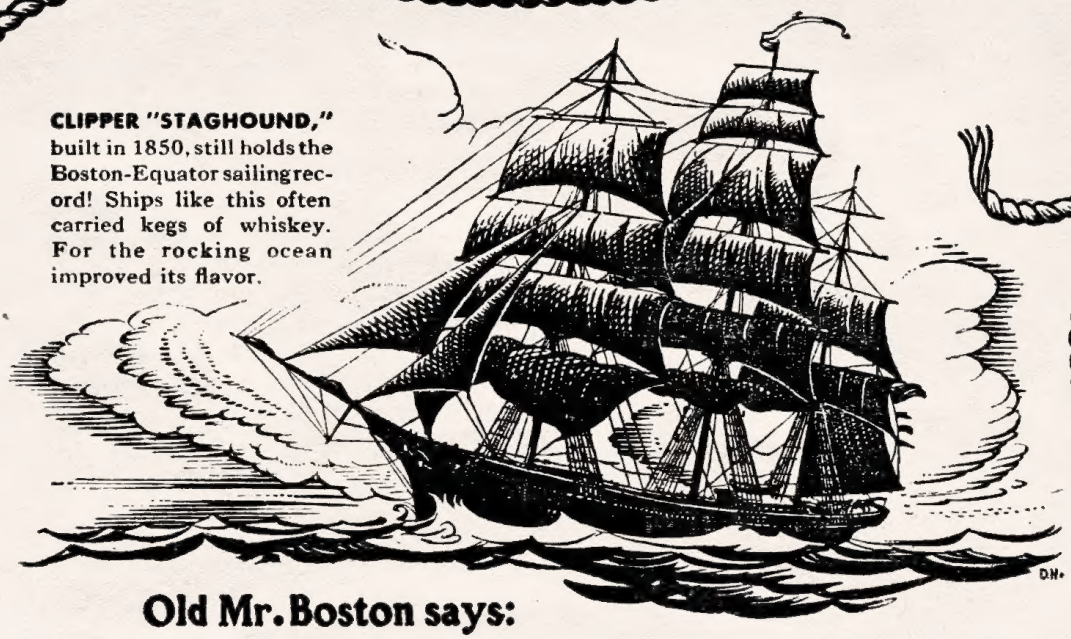

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Phil's scheme exploded with deadly abruptness when one of the Black Hawks exposed him as an impostor.

Swift, merciless death stalked Latigo Basin, and Phil Cannon knew that no man's life would be worth more than a blistering bullet until vengeance was meted out to those black-masked

RIDERS OF TERROR RANGE

by CLIFF FARRELL

CHAPTER I

SATAN'S BLACK RIDERS

In brooding silence the homespun folk of Latigo range listened to the twanging voice of the parson as he preached the funeral sermon for their neighbor who had been hanged to a tree limb in his own ranch yard the previous night.

Hank Sloan was the name of the victim who lay in the grave. He had

been dragged out of his bed at midnight by half a dozen riders who wore grotesque black satin hoods over their heads, and had been lynched before the eyes of his wife and twelve-year-old son.

The hooded band had left a note pinned to Sloan's shirt, warning friends not to cut the body down, but to leave it hanging there as bait for the turkey buzzards. That note had been signed by the Black Hawks.

Hank Sloan was the third man who had been hanged in the past year by hooded riders who always left a similar warning on their victim. Half a dozen other small ranchers and homesteaders in Latigo Basin had been flogged mercilessly with bull whips by these same masked men who always struck under the cover of darkness.

"'Vengeance is mine,' saith the Lord," intoned the preacher, who was a gaunt-jawed circuit rider. "His wrath will strike the cowardly fiends who came under the cover of night with masks over their faces, and murdered this peaceful husband and loving father. Have faith in the Lord, my friends, and keep your six-shooters primed so that you may always be prepared to serve as His agent in destroying this disciple of destruction who sits on his throne in God's green hills, and covets the valley below."

The parson's bleak gaze drilled accusingly into the smoke-blue eyes of a young, wide-shouldered cattleman who had come up through the cypress trees and was standing on the far fringe of the crowd around the grave.

An ominous stir swept the mourners as they discovered the presence of Phil Cannon. Women clutched the arms of their menfolk and those standing near the new arrival edged away.

"He who lives by the sword shall die by the sword," the circuit rider thundered.

Phil Cannon stood with his thumbs hung in his gun belt. He was the only man present who packed a six-shooter in sight, though he knew that all of them, including the preacher, had at least one gun hidden beneath their coat tails.

THE young rancher was bareheaded, and his curly yellow hair glinted in the hot afternoon sun. Wearing sixty-dollar bench-made boots, and silver-shanked spurs, he had on a dark, double-breasted range shirt, a green string tie and dark trousers, cuffed high above his boots. His horse, a powerful, satin-skinned sorrel with the marks of thoroughbred strain, stood in the background. The saddle and silver-pointed headstall on the animal were obviously expensive.

Phil Cannon now owned the big Spur Wheel Ranch which ran ten thousand head of high-grade cattle on the shaggy flanks of the Ripsaw Hills overlooking Latigo Basin. He was the only surviving son and heir of big, lusty Buck Cannon, whose body had been found a month previously in Latigo Basin with a slug in his heart. The dead rancher had been masked in a Black Hawk robe when found.

Cannon's tall, lithe-legged son had been away attending a university where he was specializing in civil engineering at the time of his father's death. Phil Cannon had arrived back in Latigo in time to attend his father's funeral. In the past three weeks he had taken over active direction of the Spur Wheel Ranch.

He was the man the circuit rider referred to as the one who sat on a throne in the green hills, coveting the range below. But he gave no sign

he knew what the preacher was talking about.

Phil bowed his head when the final consecration was intoned. As the services ended, and the crowd trailed away in the wake of the grieving widow, he moved nearer the grave and stood with inscrutable eyes looking down at the coffin.

He finally looked up at the preacher and a group of men who were standing in the background scowling at him.

"Does Mrs. Sloan need money?" he asked. "I'd be glad to—"

"That'll be taken care of," a rancher snapped.

"By friends," the circuit rider added with equal curtness.

Phil Cannon nodded and walked back to his horse. Four riders moved out of the cypress trees and jogged along at his side as he headed for the main street of Mustang town.

Phil looked at them quizzically. All were sun-cured, weathered cowhands.

"I didn't know this was pay day," he observed. "Have you boys still got drinking money jinglin' in your pokes? Is that what brought you to town today?"

"It might be pay day—for you," said one who wore black chaps and carried a black-handled gun in a black holster. "You ought to know better than to come here alone today, Phil."

MISSOURI COLE had been range boss of the Spur Wheel for twenty years. He was gray templed, with tight, cold lips and eyes as hard and keen as a diamond drill. Accompanying him were Slats McCarthy, Jeff Buckmaster and Abilene Smith, all of whom had punched Spur Wheel cattle since before Phil was born.

"Dang it, Phil," complained Slats McCarthy, "ain't we got enough to worry about without havin' to ride gun guard on you."

"I don't recollect asking for any trigger nurses to watch over me," Phil remonstrated.

"Neither did your father," said Missouri. "Buck Cannon played a lone hand, too. The result was we found him plugged in the back, an' wearin' a Black Hawk mask. We don't hanker to have you laid out dead in one of them Hallowe'en costumes, too. It sort of reflects on the rest of us boys. People avoid us like we had the itch. We aim to keep an eye on you. You don't think a college education made you bullet proof, do you?"

"Was Hank Sloan one of the men my father offered to buy out?" Phil asked, changing the subject.

"Buck once offered to buy out any and every rancher an' sod buster in the basin. That included Sloan. Also the claims owned by Sam Boggs and Tony Meola who were strung up by the Black Hawks in the past year. Also half a dozen other men who've been tied to fence posts an' petted with a bull whip. Buck withdrew his offer when they asked too high a price."

Phil asked no more questions. He was observing the bitter animosity in the faces of the bystanders as he rode into the cow town which nestled in the hills above Latigo Basin. Some were strangers who had come into the country while he was away. Others he had known since childhood. They had been friends of his father in the past. But not one of them gave any sign of recognition.

Dismounting before the plate-glass window of Merritt Sproule's solid-looking bank, Phil tied his horse at the brass hitch rail.

"Merritt Sproule sent word he wanted a powwow with me," he ex-

plained to his riders. "That's why I came to town today. I'll see what he has on his mind. You boys don't need to wait."

"We'll wait," Missouri said briefly, with a glance up and down the hostile street.

Phil ducked beneath the rail, striding toward the gilt-lettered bank door.

Nearby a group of basin people who had attended the funeral were grouped around a buckboard, offering their condolences to Hank Sloan's sad-faced widow. The bereaved woman was sobbing, and her thin-faced, freckled son was endeavoring to comfort her.

LITTLE Bobby Sloan sighted Phil there on the sidewalk and a flame blazed suddenly in the lad's eyes. With a choked cry he sprang from the buckboard, snatching a six-gun from beneath the coat of a homesteader. Then, like a wild cat, he was confronting Phil.

The gun was so big in the boy's grasp that he held it with both hands as he eared back the hammer. "You killed my dad, you dirty Black Hawk!" he sobbed. "Now I'm goin' to kill you!"

Phil was only a stride away. He could have knocked the gun from little Bobby's hands. But he did not move or speak. He stood there, his face like carved stone.

There was a flurry of skirts. A girl, who had been talking to the widow, came streaking upon the frenzied lad. She pushed the gun up just as it exploded. The bullet crashed into the bank sign above Phil's head. And still he stood like a graven image.

The girl twisted the six-shooter from the boy's hands and he suddenly burst into a storm of grief. The girl gathered him against her firm, swelling bosom, and looked up at Phil.

She had big, blue-black eyes set in a tanned, oval face. Her cheekbones were high, proud, and her mouth firm, but utterly feminine. She wore a long pleated skirt, patent-leather slippers, and a neat jacket in the style of the day, and carried herself with lithe grace. She was a stranger to Phil.

"Thank you, ma'am," he said evenly. "You saved my life."

"It was the child I was thinking of," she corrected him icily. "I didn't want Bobby to have a killing on his conscience."

"Even though you believe that killing might have been justified," Phil observed. "At any rate I'm indebted to you. I won't forget."

Her eyes flashed dark fire. "There's only one way to pay that debt. Stay out of Latigo Basin. You and your tough cowboys!"

She turned her back on Phil then, and led the weeping lad to his mother.

Phil glanced at his riders. Their hands were on their guns. Even Missouri Cole's gray composure seemed shaken.

CHAPTER II

MARKED FOR VENGEANCE

PHIL pivoted and walked into the bank, his spur chains jingling musically on the tiled floor. The door of the president's office stood open at the back of the cashier's cages. Merritt Sproule sat at his desk, his eyes impersonal and bleak as Phil entered. The banker had been a witness to Bobby Sloan's attempt to avenge his father.

"You sent for me, Mr. Sproule?" Phil asked.

His voice was respectful, for Merritt Sproule commanded respect. He

had been the friend of Buck Cannon for years.

Massive-shouldered, with powerful nose and a thrusting jaw beneath a leonine mane of iron-gray hair, the banker acted as confidential adviser to rich and poor alike. Sitting at the desk he looked big and husky. But two polished crutches nearby told a different story.

A year ago Merritt Sproule had been thrown by a horse. Since then he had dragged his helpless, flabby legs along with artificial support. It was said surgeons had given up all hope of ever restoring the use of his legs. The banker's affliction, instead of embittering him, apparently had made him only more tolerant and understanding.

But his austere eyes were uncompromising now. He made no mention of Phil's narrow escape from death.

"I sent for you, Cannon," he stated brusquely, "to make a cash offer for the Spur Wheel. A syndicate has authorized me to pay you one hundred thousand dollars for title to your graze and your brand."

There was a silence. "I don't remember mentioning that the Spur Wheel was on the market," Phil said quietly.

"It's a fair offer, Cannon. My advice is to snap it up."

"The Spur Wheel," Phil declared, "is worth close to three hundred thousand as it stands today. The men in this syndicate you mentioned aren't exactly philanthropists, are they?"

"I won't beat about the bush with you," Merritt Sproule said with a shrug. "For the sake of peace and for the sake of the terrified people in Latigo Basin I will personally add fifty thousand dollars in my own money as a bonus to you. Take it—or take the consequences. Better to leave here with a fortune in your pocket than to stay and face trouble."

"That"—Phil's voice was toneless—"is a threat."

"A warning," the banker corrected. "A final warning. The dastardly hanging of Hank Sloan was the last straw. The men of Latigo Basin are aroused at last. They are about to deal these Black Hawks some of their own medicine. Hang-tree medicine. You follow me, I am sure."

"In other words you accuse me of being the leader of these masked men who strung up Hank Sloan?"

MERRITT SPROULE'S eyes did not waver. "What else is there to think? Your father threatened these people when they first settled in the basin. He tried to buy them out at a ridiculous price. When they refused a reign of terror was started to break their spirit. Men were whipped and hung by this organization known as the Black Hawks. I was your father's friend. I believed in him until he was found dead wearing a mask after a raid on a homesteader had been beaten off. For a few weeks after your father's death we had peace on this range. Now, since you have got your feet in the stirrups at the Spur Wheel, the raids are beginning all over again. The Black Hawks are riding once more."

"Like father, like son, eh?" Phil said in that same monotone. "That's what you're trying to say."

"I advise you to sell the Spur Wheel," Sproule stated flatly.

"When hell freezes over," Phil responded, "then I'll sell the spread on those terms. It's true my father offered to buy out anyone in the basin. The basin belonged to him until crooked land sharks found a flaw in his title, and sold the graze from

under him to farmers and shoestring ranchers. He offered a fair price, but they wanted more, so he dropped the matter. He didn't need the graze. The Spur Wheel had enough for its needs in the Ripsaw Hills."

Phil's voice was now low, vibrant. "Someone in Latigo Basin shot Buck Cannon in the back. I'm finding that man, and when I do there'll be another hanging, and it won't be done by masked men. It'll be done where everyone can see it. You might pass that word around, Mr. Sproule. The Spur Wheel isn't backing away from any fight. Not as long as I can pull the trigger on a six-shooter."

"Good day, sir," the banker said regretfully. "I trust you recall what the parson said over poor Hank Sloan's grave. 'He who lives by the sword—' "

"I'm remembering," Phil said, and walked out of the bank.

His four loyal punchers surrounded him as he rode out of Mustang. Phil lifted his head presently.

"Who was she?" he asked Missouri.

The cold-eyed range boss grinned faintly. "Name of Essick. Gale Essick. Lives with her father an' mother on a little claim at the head of the basin. Been here about two years. Jud Essick runs a few cattle, an' farms some land he's cleared. The girl taught school in Mustang last term. She ain't married, but can have her pick of the field. Best dancer in the range, and can ride a horse like a top hand. She hates Spur Wheel men, and anyone named Cannon in particular. Your father was found shot in the back near the Essick place. Anything else you want to know about Gale Essick?"

"She had nice eyes," Phil mused. "You say Buck was found on the Essick place? You didn't mention that before."

"I figured you'd find it out for yourself before long, now that you're gettin' your bearings," Missouri said dryly. "You've been hellin' around considerable at night."

They were following the hill trail which would lead eventually to the big Spur Wheel headquarters farther back in the slants. The trail brought them out on a point overlooking a wide vista.

PHIL pulled up, studying the scene. Near at hand Latigo Creek emerged from the depths of Splitrock Gorge, widened, gentled down and coiled through the rolling, timber-dotted flats of Latigo Basin which was flanked on all sides by the shaggy hills.

Once the basin had been feeder range for fat Spur Wheel market beef. Now Phil counted a dozen homesteads and little ranchhouses scattered along its fifteen-mile length. There were as many more hidden from sight by timber or ridges. Wire fences glinted in the westering sun.

"Where's Hank Sloan's place?" Phil asked.

It was pointed out to him by Slats McCarthy. "An' there's Jud Essick's squat," the puncher added, indicating a neat, shake-roofed, log-built house, corral and wagon shed which stood not far below the bluffs where the stream emerged.

"What about the places owned by Sam Boggs and Tony Meola, who were hung by the Black Hawks?" Phil asked.

They were pointed out to him. Both stood at the very upper end of the basin in the shadow of Splitrock.

"Anybody living on those claims now?" Phil inquired.

"Yeah," Missouri said. "Every

piece of land that's offered for sale is bein' snapped up by strangers. Speakin' o' the devil here comes two of the new crop of Latigo Basin settlers now."

A pair of riders were coming down the trail from Mustang. They passed by with no more than a quick glance at the five Spur Wheel men. Phil watched them turn off at the fork and follow the meandering trail which descended the rocky flank of the mountain to the basin. He remembered having noticed them standing before a barroom in Mustang when he was riding out of town.

"Hard-case hombres," he remarked. "That tall one has two six-guns hid out under his coat. You're not telling me they're honest farmers."

"Well," Missouri said judiciously, "depends on what you mean by farmin'. I reckon them two has caused considerable ground to be dug up, an' quite a bit of plantin' done. Back ten years when me an' your pa got mixed up in a rustler's war over in the Long Branch country that long-coupled gent was known as Lute Gifford, though he goes by another name now. The other one with the bull neck and the weasel eyes called himself Cash Vogel. They sure did their best in them days to plant plenty of honest cowboys six feet under."

"Gun fighters," Phil mused. "I read their brand right then?"

"All the gents who are buyin' up abandoned claims pack their guns out of sight an' keep their lips buttoned," Missouri said tersely. "It's an open secret that law-abiding citizens are importing them to smash the Black Hawks an' bring peace to the range. Merritt Sproule is said to be back of the plan. In other words, these trigger punchers are supposed to keep an eye on us Spur Wheel boys to see that we don't play any more peekaboo in black masks, an' make widows an' orphans out of settlers' wives an' kids."

Phil changed the subject in a way that was becoming habitual with him. "If Jud Essick shot my father he was likely the one who pulled that black mask over his head afterward," he drawled. "Buck wasn't wearing the hood when he was hit. A bullet hole was shot in the cloth before it was put on him. But the two bullet holes didn't match up. I made sure o' that before we buried Buck."

"You're the dangedest cuss to keep a close mouth," Slats McCarthy said, torn between admiration and resentment. "Why didn't we think of that, Missouri, an' point it out to them lunk heads who run into their holes every time we ride past?"

"Shucks," Missouri said impatiently. "We knowed Buck wasn't a Black Hawk, without that kind of evidence. The point is, who in blue blazes are these night riders, an' what's their game? I can't see where they're benefitin' by raising the devil with these basin people, an' puttin' the blame on us."

"That," Phil drawled, "is what I've got to know before I can read the rest of the story."

MISSOURI eyed him narrowly. "I savvy what's on your mind," he growled. "You're aimin' to keep owlin' around in the hope of cuttin' the trail of these Black Hawks so as to get the deadwood on 'em. That's what Buck tried. He was scoutin' around every night. He must have learned too much for his own good. It's my guess he was rubbed out because he had stumbled onto the identity of these hooded snakes. You'll go the same way, too."

"Maybe," Phil agreed. "An' I reckon you will too, unless you're careful. I happen to know you do a lot of riding in the moonlight, Missouri. An' the rest of you jiggers don't stay in your bunks any too long at night. That's why all of us stand accused and convicted. Other riders on the spread have talked. Everybody knows that all of us do a lot of prowlin' at night. We've got to find these hooded devils soon or fight the whole range. Merritt Sproule served notice today that the basin people are planning a necktie party for all of us one of these nice summer nights."

"Sproule has been fooled by these Black Hawks," Missouri raged. "He used to be Buck's best friend. It's the devil of a mess when Merritt Sproule turns agin' us, too."

Phil spoke suddenly. "Might as well shove on to the ranch, boys, an' get some rest before you go out chasing moonbeams. I'll be along directly. Save some chuck for me."

Missouri hesitated dubiously.

"I just want to take a look at that trout pool in the gorge where I pulled out those two whoppers as a kid," Phil grinned. "If the stream

is low enough I might rig up some tackle one of these days an' take another crack at that pool. The fish must be as big as whales by this time."

"There never was a trout big enough to risk a broken neck climbin' into that hell hole," Slats McCarthy objected. "My hair crackles every time I think about you comin' home that day with them two big old rainbows in a gunny sack, an' braggin' that you had been down in

The sinister, hooded Hawks swooped down on the Essick house and a timber was quickly smashing the door off its hinges!

the gorge. You was only a button of twelve then."

Missouri stirred his horse. "Come on," he said. "If he wants to go trout fishin', that's his misery. But" —he looked pleadingly at Phil— "don't get careless, boy. Buck was a good fisherman, too."

CHAPTER III

TRAIL OF THE BLACK HAWKS

WHILE his riders headed reluctantly on up the trail toward the ranch, Phil rode away through the timber. Presently he came out on the rim of the gorge. Latigo Creek originated in the rugged, snow-dappled peaks which jutted in the sunset to the west, plunging down from the high country in brawling violence by way of a rugged canyon which narrowed into a mile-long, impassable gorge at this point. It emerged into Latigo Basin through a narrow cleft in a hundred-foot cliff of granite. The opening was called Splitrock.

Skirting the rim of the gorge, Phil at last dismounted and walked out on an overhanging rock which jutted ten feet from the lip of a straight wall. Sixty feet below him lay a deep, green pool which broke the foaming stretch of rapids through the gorge.

There were big trout in that pool. Many fishermen had gazed down longingly at their shadowy movement far below, but as far as Phil knew he was the only one who had ever cast a fly on its surface. It was impossible to reach the pool either from above or below because of the rapids. The only access was to descend the sheer wall from this point.

As a reckless boy, Phil had climbed down to the pool on a rope at a time when the stream was low enough to expose a ledge of rock that afforded footing for a fisherman. He had bagged two of the biggest trout any of the old-timers had ever seen, and lost several more after a blood-tingling battle. One of his fish had measured thirty inches, and the other only a fraction less.

Phil had found it impossible to climb the rope by which he descended, and in desperation he had stripped, tied his catch and clothes to the rope, then had risked swimming out by way of the stream through Splitrock some three hundred yards below the pool. He had nearly drowned in that reckless escape from the gorge, but had at last crawled to dry land in the basin, alive and thankful.

But Phil was not thinking of that reckless adventure now as he stood there. He left the overhanging rock, moving along the rim, leading his horse until he stood on the wind-polished rim of one of the massive portals through which the stream emerged into the basin. The distance to the opposite wall was little more than a rope's length. A hundred feet below, the creek ran like a millrace through the cleft.

Pinching the brim of his high-crowned hat lower over his eyes, Phil stared upstream at the walls of the gorge, where twilight shadows were gathering. He lifted a leveled arm and peered along it as though sighting a gun, or taking a bearing on some point. Afterward he began pacing off distance along the rim, counting his steps.

Presently he paused, peering around, and at last located a small lead plate which had been driven into a crevice in the rock. The plate bore a cipherlike series of numerals.

There was a burning flame in Phil Cannon's eyes as he returned to his horse.

DARKNESS had settled when he rode up to the Spur Wheel corral. As he was unsaddling, Missouri strolled from the bunkhouse, and told him chuck was over, but that the cook had saved him a plate. That was the range boss' way of expressing satisfaction that Phil had returned alive.

After a hurried meal Phil went to the big ranchhouse. The pictures of his mother and father and his two dead brothers occupied the places of honor on the center table in the big living room.

Phil's mother had died when he was ten, after contracting cholera from a homesteader's family she had volunteered to nurse. His oldest brother had died riding a killer horse in the rodeo arena at Pendleton, and another brother had gone under trying to rescue a fallen cowboy from the hoofs of a stampede.

Now Phil's father lay in a grave, accused of leading the Black Hawks. The Cannons had lived lustily and died with their boots on. The big ranch house, which had boomed to their voices, and pulsed in their virile ways, was now only an empty place of memories.

Phil went to the ranch office off the living room, and found a topographical map of Latigo range. Spreading it on a table, he sat there for half an hour intently studying it.

He finally pushed the map aside as he heard a rider coming up the ranch trail. He went through the living room and out on the porch as the arrival pulled up before the door.

A full moon had lifted above the ridges, flooding the ranch yard with brilliant, silvery light. Phil recognized the rider. It was the girl whose quick action had prevented little Bobby Sloan from shooting Phil that afternoon. Gale Essick.

She was wearing a riding skirt and a gingham waist. Hatless, her hair was cropped at shoulder length, held in place by a colorful band.

She did not dismount, and when she spoke her voice was cold, bitter.

"I found your note on the table when we got home this evening. I didn't show it to dad. He knows nothing about it. I came here to warn you, Phil Cannon, that if anything happens to my father I'll hold you personally to account. I'll shoot you if I hang for it."

Phil studied her determined face. "This note," he questioned slowly, "was signed by the Black Hawks, I reckon? How do you know I wrote it?"

"It was written on a scrap of bond paper, watermarked with the Spur Wheel brand, just like the note the Sloans got the night Hank was murdered."

"So Hank Sloan was given advance warning, too?" Phil mused. "On Spur Wheel stationery."

"Yes. Either you forgot the paper was watermarked or you're so brazen you don't care. You know you've got those poor people in the basin buffaloed. Half of them are ready to quit and pull out. Your Black Hawks have put the fear of death in them. But we're not quitting. Dad isn't the kind to run. I only want to warn you I'll hunt you down with a gun if anything happens to him."

"Have you got that Black Hawk note?"

She drew a paper from her bosom, tossed it at his feet. Phil carried it to the lamplight, and read the crudely penciled message:

Fog out of this range, Essick. This is final warnen. THE BLACK HAWKS.

The one misspelled word in the message looked as though it had

been written correctly in the first place, then erased.

The ragged scrap of paper had been torn from a sheet carrying the ranch letterhead. A traveling salesman had once badgered Buck Cannon into investing in reams of expensive business stationery, carrying a special watermark in the form of a Spur Wheel brand. Buck had taken great pride in that piece of formality, even though he hated letter writing, and usually let Missouri Cole handle the correspondence.

All of the watermark had been carefully retained when the piece was torn from the whole sheet.

Phil extended the message to the girl without comment, but she did not accept it.

"I have no further use for it," she said coldly, as she wheeled to ride away.

"I'm still remembering my debt to you," Phil called.

She glanced over her shoulder, and Phil fancied there was a glint of bafflement in her face. Then she shrugged as though dismissing a conflicting doubt.

"You know the way to return that favor," she responded. "Leave us basin people in peace."

SHE rode away then, down the trail. The instant she was out of sight Phil hurried to his room in the house, and brought out the black satin hood that had been on his father's body when it was found in the brush in Latigo Basin. The deputy sheriff who represented the law at Mustang had given him the mask with the cynical comment that perhaps he would like to keep it as a reminder of his father.

The Black Hawk mask was in the form of a half robe, reaching below the waist. The headpiece was square cut, and sewn rudely so that the two corners stood up in ears, resembling an owl's head rather than that of a hawk. It was pierced with eyeholes.

No victim of the Black Hawks had ever seen the faces of any of the men who wore satin masks. Nor had anyone heard their voices. The hooded terrorists worked in silence. What warnings they sent were in the form of messages left beforehand in the houses of their intended victims.

The mask folded into a compact flat bundle which Phil thrust inside his shirt. He buckled on two six-shooters, and made sure that he had plenty of shells. Then, hurrying to the corral, he rigged the big, deep-lunged sorrel.

Missouri Cole appeared as Phil mounted. "Goin' fishin'?" the range boss asked grimly.

"Maybe," Phil answered. "They say they bite better at night in this range."

The old puncher eyed Phil's brace of guns. "Shootin' a fish ain't always as easy as they make out," he remarked meaningly. "An' a dark-eyed gal is sometimes bad medicine for a yeller-haired cowboy about your hat size. Maybe it's a trap. I was listenin' when she told you off there in front of the house. Devils sometimes look like angels. Maybe this is a Black Hawk trick."

"I'm betting the other way," Phil said tersely. "She's on the level, or the world is cockeyed. Don't lose any sleep waitin' for me, Missouri. I might fish all night."

As he rode away he could hear Missouri cussing him out as a reckless, scatterbrained fool.

Phil headed through the hills by cattle trails with which he was familiar. An hour later he descended into Latigo Basin, keeping to the cover of timber. He crossed the willow-lined stream, and pulled up in the brush, looking across a cornfield

at the house. It was dark and silent in the brilliant moonlight. The Essicks evidently had turned in for the night.

He picketed his horse near the stream where it growled and grumbled over a riffle. The sound smothered any movement of the sorrel as it chopped at the foliage.

PHIL found a comfortable place with his back against a cottonwood, his legs outstretched. He waited there with Indian patience, arising now and then only to stretch his cramped muscles. The slow hours dragged by, and he fought off drowsiness.

Nothing happened. As daybreak came Phil pulled out, returning to the ranch. Missouri was awake and haggard looking.

"How they biting?" the range boss asked.

"Nary a strike, Missouri. Maybe another time they'll rise better."

Phil was back in the brush watching the Essick place when darkness came the next day. Again he spent a dreary, futile night. But he was back the next night and the one after that.

He sensed that the vigilance of the girl had relaxed as these four days passed without sign of a Black Hawk attack, for she became less careful of keeping the window curtains drawn after twilight.

It was past midnight of the sixth night, and the moon had waned to a sliver, which was still short of the zenith, when Phil aroused from a cat nap and came tautly awake.

Sloshing hoofs sounded in the stream at a distance. There was the faint rasp of leather as men dismounted.

Shadowy figures broke from the brush a hundred yards to Phil's left, skirted the cornfield and raced upon the sleeping Essick house like sinister shadows. Every man wore a grotesque black hood.

Two of them carried a length of dead timber which they dashed against the door of the house, tearing the panel off its hinges. They were inside instantly.

Gale Essick and her mother screamed wildly, and then the Black Hawks appeared, dragging Jud Essick in his nightshirt. They had a rope around his neck.

CHAPTER IV

BENEATH THE BLACK MASK

PHIL'S six-shooters were in his hands as he stood in the shadow watching the masked men race nearer, dragging their victim with them. They were heading toward a half-dead oak which lifted its gnarled arms in the moonlight. Not one of the night riders spoke. The raid was carried out with planned speed.

Gale Essick and her mother came screaming from the house, robes pulled over their night clothes, pleading for the life of the prisoner, but a robed man lifted a shotgun, prodding them back.

A rope sailed over a limb. Masked men grabbed the end of the lariat to drag their victim into the air.

Lifting his gun, Phil tripped the trigger. A hooded man reeled, moaning, and clutching at a bullet-scored arm. Phil fired again, but the Black Hawks had scattered like quail at the first sign of trouble, abandoning their victim, in a race for the brush.

Once there, they began shooting back, raking the willows around Phil with hot lead. A slug flipped at his hat brim, and anothed burned his ribs.

He returned the fire, trying to center their darting figures, but in

the faint moonlight the targets were vague, and none of them went down.

They reached the brush, and he heard them hit the saddle, and spur away. He raced to his own horse.

As he moved, Phil brought from his shirt the black satin hood that had been found on his dead father. Pulling it over his head, he straightened the hood so that he could see through the eyeholes, and hit the saddle in a flying leap.

The sorrel lunged through the brush and across the creek, sending water sailing in a dim silver sheen in the wan moonlight.

Emerging from the willows into the open timber beyond the stream, Phil glimpsed the shadowy figure of a masked terrorist ahead, lashing his horse to greater speed.

He could hear the pounding hoofs of the other fleeing Hawks off in the timber. The one ahead twisted, a six-shooter in his hand as the sorrel gained rapidly on his mount. Then the man lowered the gun, deluded by the hood Phil wore into believing it was one of his five comrades.

Phil drew alongside his quarry. The two of them emerged from the shadow of timber into the faint moonlight. Then the man uttered a strangled grunt of consternation as he noticed the big handsome sorrel Phil was riding.

Before he could utter another sound, Phil leaned from the saddle, and smashed him over the head with his gun barrel. The Hawk reeled, his arms flopping limply. He slid from the saddle, his body dragging like a sack of grain as one foot hung in the stirrup.

Phil caught the reins of the horse, pulling it up after a few jumps. Sliding to the ground, he quieted both animals. He listened, peering through the gloomy timber, and heard the flight of the other Hawks continue unchecked. None of them had witnessed the fate of their comrade.

The night rider lay in a crumpled heap. Phil turned him over, pulled up the hood, and peered down into the slack-jawed, unshaven face. It was Lute Gifford, the tall, hard-eyed gunman Missouri Cole had pointed out on the trail days ago as one of the fighting men that Merritt Sproule and other citizens were importing to bring peace to the range.

This "peacemaker" was a member of the Black Hawks. But he would never ride at night again. Lute Gifford was dead. He had been kicked by his horse as he dragged from the stirrup. His forehead was crushed.

Phil pulled the mask back over Gifford's mangled head. He mounted the dead man's horse, which was a chunky, cold-mouthed dun. Looping the reins of his own sorrel on the saddlehorn, he sent the animal away with a slap, gambling that it would return to the ranch.

Then he spurred in pursuit of the Black Hawks, still wearing one of their masks. He had learned the identity of one of the terrorists. But there were five more of them.

THE Hawks were heading out of the basin, climbing the mountainside toward Phil's own Spur Wheel range. He followed them and caught occasional glimpses of one or two of them above. The dun slowly overhauled them.

He guessed that he must have been sighted, but was taken for Lute Gifford.

Emerging on a high, timbered bench above the basin he saw three of the masked men not far ahead. They had slowed to a walk, and were giving him a chance to join them.

"That you, Lute?" one of them challenged.

Phil lifted his arm in a gesture of acknowledgment and fell in at the tail of the procession. He was thankful for the fading moonlight and the shadows of the cedars. The others hardly gave him a second glance, because he was about the same height as Gifford, and because of the dun he was riding.

One of the men was nursing a crimson-bandaged arm, and whining in pain, though it was plain his injury was not serious. He was the Hawk Phil had winged at the Essick place.

"Quit bellerin', Stud," a squatty, masked man snarled. "We'll meet the boys soon at the big boulder. Then we'll put a better bandage on that arm. Hell, it ain't much more'n a scratch. I'm sick o' listenin' to yore yammer."

"Who do you reckon opened up on us from the brush?" the third Hawk spoke querulously. "There was only one man there. Why didn't the ramrod let us round him up, 'stead of givin' the high sign to light a shuck?"

"The big auger don't want none of us killed an' left layin' around with a mask over our heads. Folks might guess the right answers to a lot of things if that happened. That gun-slinger was likely some jigger that just happened along about that time. We'll call on Jud Essick another time. The boss will tell us what to do. We're almost to the boulder."

They were well above the basin now, riding through slanting, boulder-studded country just above the rim of Splitrock Gorge. The black abyss of the gorge showed plainly to the left, and Phil could hear the muted drumming of the rapids.

He twisted suddenly in the saddle, peering back. He believed he had heard the faint scuff of a shod hoof on rock somewhere in the murky timber, and he fancied that he caught shadowy movement far back among the cedar boles. But it might have been one of his own Spur Wheel cattle, many of which ranged this area, or it might have been one of the other two Hawks heading for the appointed rendezvous.

But the eerie feeling of being trailed grew stronger as he rode ahead. He watched the dark timber, but saw or heard nothing more. Still, he sensed a creeping presence there. None of the other masked men had noticed. "Here's the place," one of them muttered.

THE rendezvous was an enormous granite boulder as big as a house, among the scattered cedars. As they rode up a masked figure detached itself from the shadows, holding the reins of a saddle horse.

"Keep your voices down, men," the massive-shouldered hooded man whispered tensely. "Get off your horses. Someone is prowling around. I spotted a rider trailing us half a mile back, and sent Chick to scout around. Silence!"

The whispering, crisp voice was that of Merritt Sproule, the benign, respected banker of Mustang!

Merritt Sproule, who had the pity of the range because of his pathetic affliction, needed no crutches now as he stood there wearing a Black Hawk mask. He was vigorously erect on sound legs, handling himself with the vigor of a man in perfect health. His affliction had been a pretense to delude men and women who placed complete faith in him. He was a harmless cripple only by day. After dark he was a night-riding terrorist, leader of the dreaded Black Hawks.

There was a twisted smile on Phil's

lips beneath the mask. He had unlocked the real secret of the Black Hawks, and the discovery was not as startling as it might have been a week earlier. That lead plate he had found in the bedrock above the gorge had given him the first clue to the identity of the Black Hawk chief.

He had the final proof now, and his mind flashed to ways of withdrawing from his dangerous position before his disguise was penetrated.

But a girl's startled scream sounded in the timber nearby. It was broken off abruptly, and the sound of a brief scuffle came.

A burly, hooded man appeared from the shadows, carrying a slim, struggling figure. It was Gale Essick. Wearing a black rain slicker over Levis and shirt obviously borrowed from her father, she was fighting futilely to free herself from the bearlike grasp of her captor.

CHAPTER V

HELL'S JOURNEY

PHIL felt the chill, despairing drive of utter incredulity as he looked at the captive girl.

"I ketched her in the timber, trailin' us," the burly man, who was known as Chick, panted. "She's worse'n a wild cat. What'll I do with her, Sproule?"

There was an instant of dead silence. Chick cringed a little as he realized his fatal blunder in mentioning the banker's name. The other masked men glanced uneasily at Sproule. Then the banker began to curse Chick with seething, insane fury for his slip of the tongue.

Gale Essick pushed aside the big palm the man was holding over her mouth, and stared wildly at the frenzied masked banker. "Sproule?" she gasped wildly. "Merritt Sproule! Why . . . why . . . it can't be true!"

Sproule regained a measure of calmness. He had drawn his six-shooter as though to kill Chick for his blunder. But he thought better of it.

"This is rather embarrassing," he said. His voice was suave, deadly.

That mistake on the part of Chick was the same as a sentence of death for Gale Essick. Merritt Sproule could not afford to let her live now that she knew his secret.

Everyone present realized that. And the truth dawned on the girl also. Phil saw her lips grow still more ashen. She swayed a little. Then she gained command of herself. Phil felt a mighty thrill. This dark-eyed, lithe-limbed girl had a dauntless courage, an invincible spirit.

"You—Merritt Sproule, whom we trusted so utterly," she said slowly. "You—leading these fiends? Why? In Heaven's name, why?"

Sproule did not deign to answer. He was rubbing his palms slowly together, staring at her remotely, considering his next merciless step.

The girl spoke again: "I believe I know. I never could make myself believe deep in my heart that Buck Cannon and his son were the kind of men to kill and torture innocent people. I tried to make myself believe it. I even accused Phil Cannon to his face a few days ago. You wrote those Black Hawk letters on Spur Wheel stationery, didn't you, Sproule? It would be easy for a man in your position to get his hands on some of the ranch letterheads."

Her voice steadied, took on a ringing quality as the true picture formed in her mind. "You want Latigo Basin for yourself, Sproule. Your bank has been buying up every property offered for sale, and

pretending to sell it off to these gunmen we put so much store in. They were your hirelings. They rode as Black Hawks, and now they're living among us on the claims they drove our neighbors away from. But you're still the real owner of those properties, I suppose. You diverted suspicion toward the Spur Wheel. And we believed you were an incorruptible man, someone to be pitied because of your fake affliction!"

"Who was it that interfered to save your father tonight?" Sproule asked stonily.

Gale hesitated. "I could guess his name," she said. "But I'll let you worry about that, Sproule. He may not be so easy to destroy as I am."

SPROULE laughed jeeringly. "If you mean Phil Cannon, I hardly need concern myself. I'm afraid he won't live many days more. There's been considerable talk of organizing a Vigilante Committee to take care of young Cannon and those tough cowboys who act as his bodyguard. In fact I've had considerable trouble talking them out of it. I need Phil Cannon around —to divert suspicion from myself. His father's death rather upset my plans for a time.

"You devil!" the girl said between set teeth. "You murdered Buck Cannon, didn't you, and left his body near our ranch after a pretended raid to make it look as though dad had shot him when he opened fire from a window? You must have had to do away with Cannon because you were afraid he had learned too much about you."

"Just as you have learned too much for your well-being, my dear," Sproule said icily. He turned, singled out Phil, and beckoned him out of earshot.

"Take her to the gorge, Gifford," he murmured. "I'll pay you an extra hundred for the job. It's the only way. She knows entirely too much. We'll wait here until you come back. Then we'll make another visit to the Essick place. They won't be expecting us to call there again tonight, and we'll take him by surprise. We'll—"

Merritt Sproule's voice snapped off. Phil saw a sudden startled flare in the eyes that were peering out at him from the mask.

"You're not Lute Gif—" the banker exploded.

Phil was already moving. Just what had aroused Sproule's suspicions he never knew. No doubt it was some difference in physique, or some betraying mannerism that had registered on the man's quick mind.

All Phil knew at that moment was that his disguise had been penetrated, and that he was in for a fight against overwhelming odds. He had been riding along with the play, waiting for a break in his favor, hoping to snatch the girl out of their grasp and make his escape without gunplay.

But it had to be settled with slugs now. Phil's six-shooters were in his hand as he leaped, sending the banker reeling out of his path. He slashed another masked man across the face with a gun muzzle, but it was a glancing blow that only staggered the victim. Then Phil was standing before the girl, shielding her as he crouched there, his two six-shooters weaving back and forth in a deadly arc.

"Hold it!" he grated. "Don't move!"

Gale Essick drew a startled sigh. "Phil Cannon," she breathed.

"Grab a horse," Phil ordered quickly.

He knew that the element of surprise which was working in his favor

"Ride!" Phil shouted. "I can't hold them long! Get going!"

would not last many seconds. The masked men were recoiling from the threat of his two cocked guns now, but the odds were too great to expect them to remain cowed long.

The confused Hawks did not rally until the girl had scrambled into the saddle of the banker's horse and Phil was backing swiftly toward the dun.

With a hoarse yell, Sproule dropped to the ground, snaking out his six-shooter. "Get him!" he bellowed.

Phil's guns exploded, but the banker was rolling over and over, and the slugs missed him. He turned, caught the dun horse as the animal reared, startled by the gunfire. He had no time to feel for a stirrup. He could only hang to the saddlehorn with one hand. He was forced to drop one of the six-shooters to maintain his precarious grip. Running a stride or two with the frenzied animal, he swung up.

A HELL of gunfire broke loose as Sproule and his Black Hawks went into action. The dun faltered in stride, then went pitch-poling end over end before Phil could gain a firm seat in the saddle. He threw himself clear of the bullet-killed animal and landed on his feet.

He fired two slugs from his gun, and saw one of the masked men reel blindly around and fall on his face. It was the burly one named Chick.

The remaining four were blasting at Phil in a welter of dust from the plunging horses. Even the wounded

man had a flaming gun in his hand.

"Here!" Gale Essick screamed, looming at his side, fighting down her frenzied horse.

Phil caught her extended arm, vaulted up behind her, and the animal lunged away through the dark timber. Twisting around, Phil fired his last shell at the Hawks who were racing in pursuit on foot, but the bullet failed to reach a target.

The horse carried them down the brushy slant at a stampede gallop. Then the girl screamed wildly, and the animal set its hoofs in a desperate sliding stop.

Yawning almost at the horse's feet was the black maw of Splitrock Gorge. The animal had come within an ace of plunging into the depths in its frenzied flight.

Phil saw the overhanging rock which overlooked the deep trout pool. Up the slant the four Black Hawks came racing through the brush.

Phil pulled the girl to the ground, and looked around for an avenue of escape. There was none. The four Hawks had them bracketed there on a small point of land, with the gorge at their backs.

Phil's gun was empty. There was no time to reload, for the Hawks would be upon them within seconds. Wheeling, Phil hurried the girl with him toward the overhanging rock. She screamed out, and shrank back as she found herself out on the rock with black depths on either side.

"There's a deep pool below," Phil panted. "It's our only chance. Jump with me. Hang on to me. I can swim. It's our only chance. Better to die trying than be slaughtered here and our bodies pitched into the gorge."

He clamped an arm around her waist. She shuddered, and then her nerves steadied.

"Of course it is," she breathed.

Then they plummeted into black space. Phil wondered if they would crash to their death on some submerged boulder in the pool, or whether they would be stunned by the impact, and sink to their death in the green, peaceful depths where the big trout lived.

CHAPTER VI

LIVING DEAD

WITH a numbing shock they plunged into the stream. The force of that sixty-foot leap was like a bruising blow against every muscle. But they had entered the water feet first, and after a moment of inertia Phil realized that he was alive, and reviving. Clinging to the girl, who seemed dazed, he stroked weakly toward the surface.

It seemed an age before his head came to the top, and he could breathe again. He drew Gale's head clear, resting it on his shoulder, while they drifted around in the big eddy which kept the pool always in motion. He could hear the deep vibration of the rapids above, and the lesser drone of the shorter rapids below.

The girl stirred, opened her eyes, and soon began instinctively treading water. She could swim.

"I'm all right," she gasped.

Looking up, Phil saw tiny bug-like objects on the rim, silhouetted against the dim moonlight. Sproule and his Hawks were peering into the dark gorge.

Presently a red flare appeared up there. A blazing bundle of dead brush came floating down into the gorge, casting smoky, crimson light.

"Duck," Phil murmured to the girl who was swimming strongly now.

They sank beneath the surface before the burning brush penetrated the depths. They did not emerge

until the flare had been extinguished by the stream. Then they stroked to a ledge which offered a hand hold.

More flares were being dropped from the rim by the Hawks, but as each came the two swimmers sank beneath the surface.

After a time the flares stopped coming. The rim no longer showed any sign of movement.

"They've pulled out," Phil said. "They figure we've cashed in our chips."

He pulled off the satin mask, and his flannel shirt and boots. The girl shed the cumbersome slicker.

"Here's a ledge above water," she reported, feeling around in the darkness. "It's big enough to climb out on. Some rider may happen along the rim tomorrow. They can get us out of here with a rope."

"You stay here," Phil said. "I'm going to swim out through the rapids into the basin."

"The rapids? But—"

"Sproule intends to make another call on your father tonight, and finish what he started when I touched off the fireworks. I figure I can get to your place in time to copper their game. I swam out through Split-rock when I was a button. If it could be done once, it can be done again. It isn't as tough as it looks, though it's no picnic. I fished this pool as a kid, then went out by way of the stream."

"If you can make it, I can get through, too," the girl said quietly. "I'm a fair swimmer. Do you think I'd sit here waiting, while you took a chance like that? How long have you known that Sproule was the brains behind the Black Hawks?"

"I suspected it when I read that note they left for your father. It was written by an educated man who tried to disguise his hand. I've been camped in the brush watching your place every night for a week, with the black hood they put on my father in my pocket. I downed one of them as they were pulling out from your ranch, and took his place in the line-up. I know why Sproule thought up this scheme. I'll tell you later. First we've got to get out of here. I can see you've made up your mind to go with me. I don't blame you."

They stroked to the lower end of the pool where it spilled into a stretch of fast water.

PHIL suddenly pulled the girl against him, kissed her on the lips. "That's in case I never get another chance," he said. "Let's go. Keep your body limp. The current will do all the work."

He clung to her arm as they pushed off. Then the current seized them with insistent force, and in the next instant they were swept into a foaming uproar. They shot down into the depths that attempted to hold them. Phil collided with a submerged ledge with bruising force, but he maintained his grip on the girl's arm.

Abruptly they were swept to the surface by an up current, and found themselves drifting along on a milky, whirling surface at millrace speed.

After a hundred yards they were tossed savagely about as the stream boiled through another boulder-studded channel and once they were trapped in a boiling eddy which threatened to suck them down to death. But a cross rip swept them free of that hole.

Phil saw the gray flanks of Split-rock towering ahead. A moment later they found themselves on a smooth, racing surface, whirling past the smooth base of the portals.

Another small rapids below the portals nearly finished them. Phil

was weakening, and the girl was only floating now, barely able to struggle.

At the last instant Phil felt the bruising current slacken, lose its violence. They had been carried clear of the last rapids, and into a wide sandy pool where Latigo Creek spread out and gentled down for its meandering passage of the basin.

Phil's feet found sand bottom. His lungs heaving in agony, he dragged the half-conscious girl out on a dry sandbar, laid her on her face a moment, pressing gently on her back until she began to breathe normally again.

She sat up after a moment, leaning weakly against him. She began to sob and laugh hysterically. Phil lifted her to her feet, and his arm tightened around her dripping body.

She soon got a grip on herself. "We've got to hurry," she gasped.

The Essick place was less than half a mile down the basin. The Black Hawks would have three miles or more of circuitous route to cover to reach the place.

Phil helped the exhausted girl along, half-carrying her as they began running. He had lost his second six-shooter in the pool. They were both at the end of their endurance and traveling on nerve alone as they came in sight of the Essick place. Gale drew a sobbing sigh of joy as she saw a window light burning in the house.

"We got here ahead of them, thank—" she began to murmur. But Phil silenced her, pulling her suddenly down into the wheat, which stood two feet high.

AHEAD a voice was hailing the house, calling Jud Essick's name. It was Merritt Sproule.

The rancher responded, amazement in his tone. "That you, Mr. Sproule? Come on up? What're you doin' out at this time o' night?"

The banker was riding up. "A report reached Mustang tonight that the Black Hawks are riding, Essick," he sang out. "I've been warning all the basin people to be on guard."

Jud Essick was unsuspicious. The fact that Sproule was on horseback was not unusual, for the banker had continued saddle riding, explaining that it was his only form of pleasure since his pretended affliction.

Suddenly Phil moved ahead through the wheat, with the girl at his heels. He could hear her heavy, terrified breathing.

Both of them had realized Sproule's plan. The banker had laid aside his Black Hawk mask. In the role of a friend he was riding up to the Essick place, aiming to make sure of the situation before falling upon the unsuspecting man.

Phil saw Jud Essick's wife come hurrying from the house, peering at the banker.

"The Black Hawks were here about an hour ago," Essick was saying grimly. "Somebody took a few shots at 'em from the brush as they was about to string me up, an' they skedaddled. Gale saddled up an' rode down the basin to fetch help. She ain't got back yit. I been standin' guard, waitin' fer her. I'm gittin' worried. Did you see any sign of her, Mr. Sproule?"

Phil reached the shadow of the wagon shed, and peered out at Sproule and Jud Essick, who stood in front of the shed, a rifle slung in his arm. The banker had pulled up only a few paces away from the worried father and mother.

"Didn't see any sign of her," Sproule said.

Phil detected the note of cold satisfaction in the banker's tone. Merritt Sproule had gained the information he sought. His reason for

riding up to talk to the Essicks was plain enough to Phil. Sproule had been in doubt as to just what steps the Essicks had taken to defend themselves after that first Black Hawk sortie. There was the chance that they might have sent the alarm over the basin, and that neighbors might have arrived to stand vigil through the rest of the night.

But that question was answered. Also the question in the banker's mind as to why the girl had been permitted to trail the Hawks alone. Gale Essick, instead of riding for help, had risked following the Black Hawks.

Phil guessed that the masked riders were out in the creek brush, waiting a signal from their leader to close in.

Sproule was sure of his ground now. He wheeled his horse. "I'll push on to Lute Gifford's place," he said, "and warn him the Hawks are out tonight. If they failed in their raid here I imagine you can be assured they won't return—tonight at least. I'll ride back this way later on, Essick."

The banker rode away, heading for the creek and vanishing into the brush. The instant he had disappeared Phil and the girl rushed to Jud Essick's side.

The rancher and his wife uttered startled, thankful exclamations. "Gale, my dearest," her mother babbled, gathering her in her arms. "You're soaked to the skin! What happened?"

Jud Essick was glaring at Phil. He uttered a startled oath, lifting the rifle.

GALE pushed the gun down. "Phil Cannon is innocent, dad," she whispered. "Keep your voice down. The Black Hawks are coming back. Look!"

She pulled her father and mother back into the shadow of the wagon shed, pointing to a vague form that was moving through the wheat. It was a hooded man, half crouching, coming at a run. To left and right were others. Merritt Sproule had sent his killers upon the ranch.

Jud Essick had a six-shooter buckled around his waist. Phil jerked out the gun, with a murmured warning for silence.

He now counted four running figures. They were approaching from back of the wagon shed, expecting to take Essick by surprise. The fact that there were four of them proved that Sproule had donned his mask again, assuming the role of a Black Hawk.

The hooded men came erect, charging in for the kill. Phil could hear Essick breathing hard as he gripped the rifle. He pushed Gale and her mother into the open door of the wagon shed where they would be protected from slugs.

Singling out Merritt Sproule's massive shoulders beneath the black hood as they came within range, Phil lifted his voice:

"Sproule!" he barked. "Stand your hands! All of you! We've got you dead to rights."

The masked figures halted in stride. Then Sproule's six-shooter thundered as he fired blindly into the shadows of the wagon shed.

Phil's six-shooter exploded. He aimed low, and saw Sproule crumple and reel on a bullet-broken leg. Jud Essick opened up at the same time with his rifle, and one of the masked men sagged and pitched on his face.

The remaining two darted aside, scuttling for the wheat field for cover, shooting as they moved. Phil picked one of them off.

The last Black Hawk suddenly halted, throwing down his gun and yelling a hoarse plea for mercy.

Jud Essick would have shot the hooded man, but Phil pushed the gun down. "The law will take care of that," he said hoarsely.

They moved out, disarmed the prisoner, and looked at the three who lay in the shadows. Daylight was beginning to cast a wan pallor over the scene now. Two of the Black Hawks were dead. Merritt Sproule lay wounded and dazed.

Phil knelt over the banker. Sproule was moaning in pain, but his bullet wound was not fatal.

"You'll live to swing, Sproule," Phil said grimly.

Jud Essick stared unbelievingly at the face of the banker as Phil stripped off the Black Hawk mask.

"Here's your Black Hawk leader," Phil said. "Sproule was gunning for millions, Essick. This was no ordinary range grab. I found the marks of a hydrographic survey along Splitrock Gorge nearly a week ago, and that gave me the first clue as to what was going on. I studied engineering in college. Splitrock forms a natural site for a dam that would furnish electrical power, and act as a reservoir to irrigate a million acres east of the basin, as well as tripling the value of land in the basin itself. I own title to all of Splitrock Gorge. Now do you savvy why Sproule sold his soul to the devil to get his hands not only on the basin and its water rights, but on my ranch?"

Jud Essick could only continue to stare incredulously at the face of the man he had believed in. He lifted his head, looked at his daughter, and she nodded.

"It's true, dad. Sproule tried to murder me too tonight because I had learned his secret."

LATER on Jud Essick spread the word to neighbors. When the sun came up the Essick place was a swarming hive of excited basin folk. The word spread like a prairie fire over the range, and a steady line of racing buckboards and riders continued to arrive.

Missouri Cole and the Spur Wheel crew pulled in and were being embarrassed by the apologies of the basin folk who had feared and hated them only a few hours in the past.

A wild jubilation gripped these people now. The deadly weight of terror had been lifted from their minds.

"If you want a dam built," Phil told them, "we'll form a syndicate and share the profits according to the water rights we all own. There's a chance here to make every one of you wealthy. We can work out the details later."

Men gripped his hand, cheered his name. They cheered the name of Buck Cannon whose death had not been in vain.

Phil found a chance to take Gale's arm and lead her away out of sight of the turmoil in the ranch yard. He pulled her against him and kissed her, and this time he took his time about it.

"In case I never get another chance," he grinned.

"I'll arrange," Gale said, "other opportunities for you in the future."

Her arms tightened around his neck and her dark eyes were soft and happy as she looked up at him.

THE END.

SHOWDOWN BEYOND THE RIVER

by NORMAN A. FOX

The three gun-swift trail wolves shadowing the Hashknife herd were ready to make their kill and Pat Caraway still didn't know whether his one-man crew would side him in a powder-smoke payoff

PAT CARAWAY had donned his heavy sheepskin before stepping outside; then, standing in his Hashknife ranch yard, he turned his lean face to the north, reflecting that all that menaced him lay in that direction. Yonderly was Pike McCandless' Lazy Seven, a potent threat because McCandless coveted the broad acres of the Hashknife with a lust for land that would brook no interference. And yonderly, where the naked Montana prairie merged with Canada, a blizzard was brewing to blast the last hope of a two-bit cowman.

Man and nature, one as savage and ruthless as the other—they made an overwhelming combination to fight. But if Pat shivered it was only because the wind had teeth in it. Short in stature, Pat Caraway wasn't short in courage. He'd had the nerve to trail his scanty herd to Montana when Texas grass grew thin. He'd had the nerve to start a spread in the very shadow of the domineering Lazy Seven. And he'd have the nerve to make the grim gamble that would beat both Pike McCandless and the blizzard.

But Pat wasn't thinking of those things at the moment, for his gray eyes were upon a rider thundering across the flats toward him. Old Chick Deever, as tall and lanky as his boss was short and stubby, was all the crew the Hashknife had. Excitement puckered the puncher's leathery face as he swung from his saddle.

"They're wise to us, Pat!" he announced excitedly. "McCandless and his bunch. They're aimin' to stop us!"

Pat's fingers bit into the cowhand's arm. "They're wise!" he echoed. "How in thunderation—"

"I bin down to the saloon at the Crossings," Chick explained breathlessly. "You recollect that baldheaded barkeep? Last summer I saved him from havin' a bottle busted over his head by a drunk Lazy Seven waddy and ever since he's been plumb beholdin' to me. He said Pike McCandless was doin' a little liquorin' last night. Ben Rucker was with him and that rat-faced gunny, the Amarillo Kid. They was talkin' about how we bunched the Hashknife beef this week."

"I saw riders on the skyline!" Pat interjected.

"They was spyin' all right," Chick agreed. "They don't know nothin' about Buffalo Jim Bancroft writin' you to bring yore critters down across the Medicine River to winter-graze on his spread. But they know we're movin' 'em some place and they've guessed it's to sheltered range. Pat, they aim to stop us!"

PAT frowned, massaging his craggy jaw with stubby fingers. He'd worked for Buffalo Jim down in Texas and Bancroft was a gent with a heap of respect for a youngster who started on his own. Beyond the Medicine, Bancroft had sheltered range to spare, and Pat was welcome to use that range. And it meant beating the blizzards and beating McCandless at the same time, for the Hashknife herd would get through the winter intact. McCandless had undoubtedly been counting on breaking the Hashknife by spring.

But now the cat was out of the bag. McCandless had guessed at Pat's last-chance hope. And McCandless would see that the Hashknife herd never reached the range beyond the river. Let those cattle be scattered somewhere along the trail and the Hashknife was doomed. It was that simple.

And Pat Caraway's decision was equally simple.

"We won't wait for this first blizzard to pass and a chinook to warm things up before trailin'," he announced. "We start for the Medicine today, Chick. We'll be on our way before McCandless finds we're gone."

Chick nodded, his eyes thoughtful as he glanced toward the bunkhouse, a large affair which was a

On the banks of the Medicine the long-awaited storm broke in a fury of slashing guns.

monument to Pat's hope that some day this would be a man-sized spread with a man-sized crew.

"That grub liner, Tex Rountree? He's still here?"

Pat nodded.

"I bin thinkin' about him, boss," Chick said slowly. "That name o' his was plumb familiar. Now I'm rememberin'. There was a Buck Rountree who had a ranch along the Pecos. He had two boys and one of 'em turned outlaw and killer—a right bad hombre. From the description on Texas dodgers, he could be this Tex Rountree."

"You figger—"

Chick shrugged. "He's the kind McCandless would likely hire—a gunny like Ben Rucker and the Amarillo Kid. Supposin' Rountree was sent here by McCandless to spy on us? You've fed Rountree for three weeks and you shore don't owe him nothin'. Better send him lopin' afore we start the drive."

Pat frowned. "No," he said. "Spy or not, I'm hirin' him for the drive."

Chick looked so slack-jawed Pat explained. "I've been meanin' to pick up some extra hands for the job," he said. "There ain't time for that now. But if yonder blizzard hits before we cross the Medicine, we'll need help mighty bad. I'm takin' a chance on Rountree, Chick. I've got no choice."

"I dunno," the puncher muttered dubiously. "I dunno."

But Pat was marching toward the bunkhouse and when he kicked open the door he found Tex Rountree idly playing solitaire. For a moment Pat studied the man, gauging the sinuous leanness of him, inventorying the thin hatchet face, the inscrutable ageless features.

"I'm trailin' across the Medicine—starting today," Pat said. "You've got Texas gear so you must savvy cows. Want to make a hand?"

Rountree pinched out his cigarette, his eyes blank. "I reckon," he said and reached for his sheepskin.

He was behind Pat as the two trudged toward the hastily erected corrals housing the herd. It came to Pat that circumstances were forcing him to turn his exposed back to Tex Rountree in more ways than one.

THE Hashknife herd plodded along spiritlessly under the sullen sky, a gaunt ghost of a herd with lean heads and hungry eyes. Pat, riding in drag position, wondered how many could have survived the coming winter when Hashknife grass was glazed with ice. Next winter there'd be no need for this migration, for there'd be haystacks here, Pat vowed. Meanwhile the range beyond the river would save the herd. And save Pat Caraway, cattleman.

It was past noon and Pat planned on covering considerable distance before this brief day ended. Pike McCandless would not expect such a move with a blizzard threatening. But when McCandless did discover that the herd was gone, the Lazy Seven gunnies would be on the trail. And then—

Pat fingered the .45 he'd transferred to the pocket of his sheepskin. He didn't want trouble, but if it came he'd answer it with a fiery tongue. There was the possibility that he might outrun McCandless, be across the Medicine before the man overtook him, but he wasn't counting too much on that. He knew McCandless, knew the man would stop at nothing when there was such an opportunity to ruin the Hashknife forever.

Yet when dusk found them miles from the home ranch, the only men-

ace to the north was the blizzard. Chick was riding point with Rountree flanking and the three herded the cattle into a blind coulee. At its mouth they built a fire of dried sage and chips, thus holding the animals corralled and dispensing with the necessity of nighthawking.

After Pat had cooked a meager meal he rolled into blankets to sleep fitfully, and in the morning awoke to find a threatening moan in the wind. Chick stared at the dark line that grew on the horizon.

"She's a-comin'," he prophesied. "She'll be roarin' hell fer leather out of Canada mighty soon."

Chick had more to say, but he waited until the herd was on the move, then dropped back beside Pat.

"I kept an eye on Rountree last night," Chick reported. "Once he got up and took a walk for hisself. Me, I sneaked behind. He just stood and gazed north like he was expectin' somebody to show up—and it so dark you couldn't see five feet away!"

Instinctively Pat glanced behind, but nothing unusual met his gaze. It occurred to him that his nerves were growing taut from the strain of this drive. Now there was something else to bedevil him—another indication that Rountree was up to no good. Who had the man been expecting? Who else could he be expecting but Pike McCandless?

"Looks mighty funny," Chick observed and thereby voiced Pat's own thought. "But I'll say this much for that Tejano—he's a top hand with cattle."

Chick spurred up ahead again and the cattle were hazed onward, topping a sage-covered rise. And suddenly Pat found himself prickling with a sensation of danger. His eyes swept everywhere in search of the intangible thing that was manifesting itself. To his left a sage stalk shivered. The wind? Or perhaps a lurking coyote, Pat decided. Then flame streaked toward him and a gun boomed, the bullet droning past Pat's ear.

McCANDLESS!" Pat cried and drove his horse into a run. "Chick! Keep the herd moving. I'll stall 'em!"

Jerking off his gloves, he pawed for his .45 just as a man jackknifed upright from the sage's concealment, a big, bearded man—Pike McCandless. Pat headed his horse straight for the Lazy Seven owner.

Ben Rucker, squat and misshapen, put in an appearance, too, and as Pat spilled from his saddle to zigzag forward on foot, shooting as he came, the Amarillo Kid, a lean, thin-faced man, bobbed up beside Rucker. All three were shooting and bullets splintered the frozen earth at Pat's feet. But still he charged on, spurred by a boiling anger. From the corner of his eye he saw Chick and Rountree firing, spurring away from the herd to side him.

"The cattle!" Pat yelled. "Take care of the cattle!"

He kept running as he yelled, but suddenly the foe was in flight, scattering, darting for horses which had been concealed behind the rise. McCandless, it seemed, had no stomach for even odds.

Pat was fifty yards behind them when they vaulted into saddles. Dropping to one knee he tried to aim carefully, to catch McCandless, the kingpin, in his sights. But his fingers had stiffened in the icy wind and his naked hand quivered, his shots going wild when he fired.

Then the three were into saddles, racing away. Pat let them go. He turned toward the herd, and in that moment his victory was ashes in his

mouth, for old Chick Deever was teetering in his saddle, his fingers blindly seeking the horn. Not finding it, he slipped awkwardly to the frozen ground.

The cowhand's eyes were still open when Pat reached him and cradled him in his arms. "Hurt bad?" Pat asked gently and knew the answer before it came.

"Through . . . the lungs . . . I think," Chick gasped, scarcely above a whisper. "Boss . . . don't quit. Get them critters across . . . the Medicine."

"I'll get 'em across," Pat promised grimly.

"An' Rountree . . . watch him, boss. When we tossed lead . . . at them skunks . . . he didn't aim to hit 'em. He was . . . shootin' . . . shootin' . . . high—"

It was the last thing Chick Deever ever said. But long after his lips had been stilled, Pat Caraway held him in his arms and thought of many things—the long trail from Texas and rivers forded at flood time—one tobacco sack shared by two and pay days that had been postponed. He wasn't conscious that Tex Rountree stood beside him until the man spoke.

"Reckon we'd better get a grave dug," the taciturn Texan said. "Ain't much daylight left, Caraway, and we're a mighty long way from the Medicine."

PAT came to his feet, his eyes locking with Rountree's. Was this man working for McCandless?—he wondered savagely. If it were true, then Rountree was as much the murderer of Chick as whoever had fired the shot.

And yet there was only the shadow of suspicion with no proof to back it. Chick might have been mistaken all along. The Rountree, who was a Texas killer, might be an entirely different gent. Because Pat Caraway was a just man, that faint thread of doubt was strong enough to tie his gun hand.

"Reckon you're right," he said gruffly and bent to the task of gathering rocks to build a cairn.

But an hour later when the mound was behind them and they were hazing the herd onward, Pat gave himself to solemn reflection. He had only one man to help him and that man was Tex Rountree who might be a traitor. Chick Deever, a cowhand to the end, had wanted the herd to cross the Medicine. But if Chick had been right in his suspicions, then Pat was going to need an enemy's help to make Chick's dying wish come true.

It was a predicament to make the gods laugh, but the only gods on this desolate range were the storm gods who muttered beyond the northern horizon. Glancing back in that direction, Pat stiffened in his saddle. Three horsemen followed slowly, their figures dim in the distance. But Pat knew them—and knew their intent.

Pike McCandless and his men! It looked as though they weren't anxious to risk another shoot out. That meant that so long as Pat was alert there'd be no attack. But—and Pat's mouth went dry at the thought—if he relaxed his caution just for a moment! He'd heard of wolves trailing men hour after hour, day after day, waiting the moment of exhaustion. Pike McCandless was adopting wolf tactics.

In sudden fury Pat emptied his six-gun in McCandless' direction, knowing, even as he triggered, that the distance was far too great. Rountree gave him a curious glance but Pat waved the man onward. Pocketing his gun, he steeled him-

self against the sleepless hours ahead.

It was an endless day. There were enough bunch quitters in the Hashknife herd to keep both men constantly on the move. Two men can not do the work of three or four and their progress was slow. And always Pike McCandless and his satellites kept the same distance behind them—stalking, waiting!

At nightfall Pat found another coulee to corral the herd, but this evening they built no fire. Rountree wrapped himself in his blankets and was soon snoring. But Pat lay there sleepless and tense, his ears strained to catch any alien sound that might not be smothered by the moaning wind.

How close was Pike McCandless? That was the tormenting question. And how long could he hold the man off? Pat didn't know, but suddenly inspiration brought him out of his blankets. Stepping across Rountree cautiously, he left the coulee and scanned the prairie to the north. A half mile away a pin point of fire pricked the enveloping curtain of the night.

That would be McCandless' camp, a snug camp with a fire. But Pat was grateful for that beacon as he stalked toward it. Now the hunted had turned hunter and, nearing the fire, he eased his .45 out of his pocket, hesitating just beyond the wavering rim of light. Two forms were wrapped in blankets. Another sat hunched near the blaze, chin on knees—the Amarillo Kid.

"Hoist 'em, Kid!" Pat grated and stepped into the light.

The Amarillo Kid jerked to life with startling suddenness, his vicious oath bringing McCandless and Ben Rucker out of blankets. Heedless of Pat's gun, the Kid was clawing for his own weapon. A shot that tugged at the Kid's sleeve discouraged him, but McCandless was reaching for his gun, lying nearby. Lunging toward the Lazy Seven owner, Pat brought his heel down on McCandless' hand—hard.

With McCandless howling in pain, Pat swiveled his gun and there was menace enough in that motion to make the Kid drop his weapon. Ben Rucker wasn't of a mind to take cards and Pat scooped up three guns unchallenged and pocketed them.

"Git up and git ready to march!" Pat ordered.

McCandless sought refuge in bluster. "What you aimin' to do with us, Caraway?" he demanded. "Turn us loose on the prairie to freeze?"

"So long as I've got a blizzard to beat, you're more valuable alive," Pat countered. "Fetch your hosses and come along!"

DEAF to their curses and protests, he herded them across the prairie to the coulee. Tex Rountree was sitting up in his blankets, pawing at his eyes, when they arrived.

"Get a fire goin', Tex," Pat ordered. With the blaze blossoming a few minutes later, he indicated his prisoners. "Some new hands," he explained. "They're going to help us trail the herd to the range beyond the river. After that I'm takin' them to Judith town. The law'll hang all three of 'em for Chick's death."

Just for an instant a glance passed between the Amarillo Kid and Tex Rountree, a glance that might have meant anything. But no word was spoken and the Lazy Seven men, shrouding themselves in sullen silence, were soon wrapped in the blankets Pat had forced them to fetch along. Pat didn't tie them. It would be murder to cut off a man's circulation in bitter weather like this. But in his own blankets he lay with his

gun in his hand. There'd be no sleep for him this night—and no one to spell him on his vigil.

No, Tex Rountree couldn't be counted on. But, on the other hand, if Rountree aimed to side the Lazy Seven he wasn't going to get the chance tonight. Through the weary hours Pat kept guard, alert for any indication of a concerted move on the part of his enemies. Many times he dozed off but always he jerked awake with nerve-jangling suddenness.

Morning found him red-eyed and fuzzy-brained, driving his weary body by sheer force. His temper was as short as his stature when he forced his prisoners into saddles, making them take flanking positions while he rode drag. Should he take Rountree's gun away from him, he wondered, add it to the collection he now carried in his saddlebag? But still that thin thread of doubt was there to deter him. He compromised with himself by placing Rountree in point position where he himself could watch the man constantly.

Plodding through the morning, Pat often found his chin upon his chest as the hours passed. Two nights with practically no sleep! Could he last out the day? The blizzard still hung off, but there was an ominous quality to the air, a sinister chill to prove the storm was in the offing.

Midafternoon. Pat detected a faint upthrust to the southern horizon but he stared for a long time before understanding penetrated his foggy mind. Hills beyond the Medicine! Hills to shelter a hundred herds when the blizzards blew. Life for the Hashknife cattle! As though they sensed the significance of it, there was a certain alertness in the herd that hadn't been there before.

But those hills were not as close as they seemed. Dusk swooped down while Pat was still straining his eyes for a first glimpse of an ice-sheathed river. It couldn't be far away now! But it was far enough away that there'd be no crossing it tonight. Desperate though he was, Pat had to bow before the inevitability of that truth. They'd need daylight when the herd blundered out upon uncertain ice.

Thus they made camp again, five weary, sullen men. No more than half a dozen words were spoken before they were all into blankets. And once again Pat bedded down with his gun in his hand. Near him was the saddlebag containing the guns he'd captured.

Should have thrown those guns away, Pat thought sleepily. That was it. Should have dropped 'em on the prairie. Funny how a fellow's thinker didn't tick worth a darn if he missed his sleep. Funny how hard it was to keep his eyes open.

JERKING to alertness, he realized he'd been asleep. Some slight movement had disturbed him, and with the fire dying low, his eyes probed the fading light for the cause. Those shapeless bundles yonder, those were Pike McCandless and Ben Rucker. And that was the Amarillo Kid on the other side of the fire. *But who was bending over the Kid?*

Pat's gun had slipped from his fingers. With a vague premonition of peril he started to reach for it when a voice arrested him.

"Don't, Caraway!" it advised. "I've got you covered!"

It was Tex Rountree who had spoken.

And it was Rountree who hovered over the Amarillo Kid. Now the Kid was lunging out of blankets, kicking the fire to life. He had an iron and when he shook McCandless and Rucker awake, he pressed guns into

their hands. Pat's empty saddlebag gave mute evidence as to where those guns had come from.

All this Pat saw and understood. Rountree had gotten the guns and passed them over to the Amarillo Kid. Rountree was siding the Lazy Seven, showing his true hand at last.

And that was why the heart went out of Pat Caraway. Against every obstacle he'd brought the Hashknife herd almost to the bank of the Medicine. With enemies on his trail he'd turned the tables on his foe and made them serve him. Chick Deever had forfeited his life and still the herd had gone on. And now, with victory in sight, the cause was lost.

Scant wonder there was triumph in the bearded face of Pike McCandless. Scant wonder his laugh was hearty as he leered across the fire at the still-faced Rountree.

"Good work, feller!" he applauded.

"Never mind that," Rountree snapped and fastened his gaze on Pat. "I'll be ridin' away with these Lazy Seven gents, Caraway," he said. "You'll hate my guts, but I want you to know that before I give the Kid the guns I got his promise that they'd let you live."

"Sure," said McCandless. "We'll leave Caraway be, if you say so, Rountree." But he winked at squat Ben Rucker.

Words came to Pat with a rush and his eyes blazed as he glared at Rountree. "So you're all Chick Deever suspected you of being," he said bitterly. "Tex Rountree—outlaw and killer. I hope McCandless pays you well for tonight's work. You look like a cowman and act like a cowman, Rountree. But you're all skunk!"

He expected the Texan to flare in return, but if there was anything in Rountree's face it was a profound sadness.

"It makes no never mind now, but I want you to know the straight of this, Caraway," Rountree said. "I'm *not* the Texas outlaw you think I am. I'm a cowman, same as you. Didn't Chick tell you there was *two* Rountree boys, the sons of Buck Rountree who ranched along the Pecos? I'm the one who stayed straight. I've cold-trailed my brother all the way from Texas. You see, he's got a decent streak and I was hopin' I could talk him into goin' straight."

It was the longest speech Tex Rountree had ever made, but the thing that amazed Pat was the contradiction in the man's words .

"Supposin' you are the brother instead of the gent Chick thought you was?" Pat said skeptically. "You're actin' like an outlaw yourself!"

Rountree nodded. "This chore tonight makes me an owlhooter, too," he admitted. "Blast it, Caraway, can't you see I got no choice? You said the law in Judith would hang them—all of them. Blood is thicker than water, Caraway. I couldn't stand by and let the rope get him without liftin' a hand. Don't you savvy? The Amarillo Kid is my brother!"

Pat blinked. And yet the truth was not so astounding. There was a likeness between those two beyond the fire—the same thin faces, the same lean bodies. No wonder Tex Rountree had aimed high when his gun was turned against the Kid!

AND yet, in this moment when he should have been hating the man, Pat knew instead a twinge of pity. It was no easy choice Rountree had made. The man's face proved that. And then Pat became conscious that the Amarillo Kid was also staring at Tex Rountree, staring in fascinated fashion, mystification in his own eyes.

"Wait!" the Kid croaked. "You ain't doin' this, Tex! The owlhoot is no life for a man, but I found that out too late, Tex. I can't turn back now—but I can damn well keep you from steppin' in the wrong direction!"

"Kid!" McCandless snapped. "You're talkin' like a fool. We—"

"You ain't talkin' me out o' this, Pike!" the Kid barked. "Whatever I've done—and it's been plenty—I never killed a man from ambush like you killed that Hashknife waddy the other day. And I ain't so low that I'll drag Tex down after me. Not when he come all the way from Texas to try and save me, then give me my gun tonight. Do you savvy, Pike? *I ain't lettin' him go through with it!*"

Such was the fire that touched off the split-second fuse.

Pike McCandless' gun tilted upward, spouting flame. Before that blast the Amarillo Kid went to his knees and sagged face forward. When McCandless swung his gun toward Tex Rountree, Ben Rucker was triggering, too. But Pat was snatching for the gun he hadn't dared reach and with it in his hand the odds were even. It was him and Rountree against the two Lazy Seven men.

Ben Rucker had singled Pat out and one of his bullets jerked the sleeve of Pat's sheepskin in passing. But Rucker was in Pat's sights now and the squat man's legs collapsed beneath him. Rucker was out of it! Now there was only McCandless to be accounted for, but in the very moment that Pat tilted his gun in McCandless' direction, the Lazy Seven owner was speared by a bullet from Tex Rountree. For a second McCandless hung as though impaled upon an invisible stake and then he sprawled across the body of Rucker.

It was over. But Pat stood swaying, his smoking gun still in his hand, his great weariness threatening to engulf him. Rountree was cradling the Amarillo Kid in his arms.

"He's hard hit?" Pat asked.

"He's dead," Rountree answered low-voiced. "Better get yourself some sleep, Caraway. Me, I've got a grave to dig tonight."

He rased his stricken eyes and searched Pat's face. "I told you he had a decent streak in him," he said fiercely. "I put up at your Hashknife so I could be near him, figgerin' that some day I'd get the chance to bring that decent streak to the top. I . . . I didn't think it would be this way. One good deed to balance up things at the finish. Do you reckon that'll be remembered on . . . on the range beyond the river?"

THE blizzard broke in midmorning with snow gusting out of the north, borne upon shrieking wings. But it didn't matter, for they'd crossed the frozen Medicine at dawn and the Hashknife herd was upon Buffalo Jim Bancroft's range. The two men who'd fetched it were facing toward the not-too-distant ranch buildings, the wind at their backs.

Pat Caraway broke a long silence. "Now that Chick's gone, I'll be needing a hand," he said. "I've got a growin' spread and it'll grow fast since McCandless won't be botherin' it. You interested, Rountree?"

"I reckon," the Texan replied.

And Pat Caraway, nodding, solemnly, said no more, for he and Tex Rountree were men of a common breed who would always understand each other. Where the trail permitted they rode knee to knee and stirrup to stirrup—cattlemen, both of them.

THE END

KILLER'S TRAIL

by JIM KJELGAARD

A lawless plunderer of the woodlands, that cat no longer killed to live—he lived to kill!

THE slope was stony, with a few sparse poplars and an occasional bunch of laurel growing among the stones. The big wild cat, an old tom, weighing about thirty-five pounds, looked down from the top of the ridge.

There was something chilling that showed plainly in the cat's yellow eyes as they swept every inch of the stones, roved from poplars to laurel and back again. It was a murderous quality that is also in the eyes of killer horses and killer men. This old cat, grown surly with age, no longer killed to live. Now he lived to kill. And at last he found what he had been searching for, what he had thought he would find here at this time of day.

Halfway down the slope, just below one of the green patches of laurel, something thrust up that might have been a withered skeleton

The buck ran frantically, but with every step the cat's fangs got closer to the jugular.

of bush or shrub from which the leaves and bark had been stripped. Only it was too polished, too white and too symmetrical. The cat fixed his eyes on it and, after a minute, he saw it move.

The cat flattened himself on the ground. When the thing moved, he had definitely identified the skeleton structure as the branching antlers of a deer that had come to this sunny slope to bask in the afternoon sun. Thrusting one velvet paw ahead of the other so carefully and so quietly that not a stone rattled or a twig cracked, the wild cat began moving cautiously down the slope.

Creeping from bush to bush, hiding behind rocks and stones that seemed scarcely big enough to conceal a field mouse, the cat worked down to within two feet of the laurel below which the deer lay. Flattening himself still more, the stalking killer crawled in among the twisted stalks and from the center of them studied the buck.

Entirely unaware of danger, the buck lay with his head stretched out and his muzzle resting on the ground. His antlers, five points to a side, thrust straight up. It was a big buck, the cat saw. But he had killed bigger ones. The killer sheathed and unsheathed his claws, tensed his muscles, and sprang up and out to land squarely astride the buck's neck.

For a bare second, taken wholly by surprise, the buck lay quivering in his bed. The cat sank front and hind claws in his victim's neck, while his fangs sought the jugular. Then the buck was on his feet, racing madly down the slope.

Balancing himself, swaying with the buck's motion and working his claws deeper into the deer's neck, the cat held his place while his teeth ground in. Completely terrorized, the deer had no thought of fighting or of striking back. About a hundred and fifty feet from the laurel thicket, the cat got its teeth through the last bit of muscle that protected the jugular. A little well of bright blood spurted out to drench his face and jaws.

The buck staggered, but ran a few feet more. Then he wilted slowly to the ground. For a moment, with a mighty effort, he held his head up and a heaving bawl was forced from his throat. He struggled spasmodically in a vain attempt to get to his feet, then was still.

THE cat hopped off, and a purring growl of satisfaction came from his throat as for a moment he studied the animal he had slain. He was not hungry, but because they were titbits that he loved, he bit through the ribs and ate part of the heart and lungs. Then contemptuously scratching dirt over the rest of the carcass, he started back up the ridge.

He walked openly, not even trying to conceal himself. There were few bears in the Magadie Hills, and such as lived there were amiable creatures more disposed to play than to fight. Few men ever came into the country with traps and guns. And, since the bears did not count, the cat was absolute dictator of the Magadies.

Thirty-five pounds of sheer ferocity, he forced his way by the strength of his fangs and the power in his claws. Everything else quailed before him, and died if it did not get out of his way in time. The cat's rule was one of terror, tyranny and absolute ruthlessness.

A hundred feet from where the cat had made his kill, a long-tailed mouse jumped from a bunch of dried ferns and tried to run toward a hole under a stone. But another stone intervened, and the mouse scrambled

frantically to get over it. The cat stood still, a gleam of vicious amusement in his eyes.

The long-tailed mouse was a rare thing in the woods. Crippled from birth, he had somehow managed to reach maturity by exercising supercaution, and by a run of luck. Ordinarily he would have been caught by a fox, cat or weasel, the first time he ventured away from his mother's den.

Too terror-stricken even to think of going around the stone, the mouse continued to bob up and down in a frantic effort to get over it. The cat flicked his front paw out, and closed his claws on the little animal's furry back. He drew the squeaking rodent to him, and let it go again. Bright drops of blood marked the mouse's trail when he ran again to the stone. Still amused, the cat watched him trying to get over it. Then, tiring of the sport, he brought his front paw down on the mouse and crushed him into the stony earth.

The cat walked on, dimly understanding the immutable workings of nature in which he had just played a part. It was inevitable that the mouse die this way. No crippled or abnormal thing can continue to survive in an environment where life demands physical perfection.

But, while recognizing this, the cat failed to recognize another thing. To none of her children did a wise nature give a mandate to kill unrestrictedly and recklessly. All who did, must sooner or later come to accounts for it.

THE cat had made so many kills lately—three deer and at least a dozen smaller animals and birds in the past week—that his belly was always full. When he got back to the top of the ridge he was sleepy. For a bit he stood while the cold November breeze eddied up the ridge, blowing his fur as it swirled about him. It carried the scent of no other animal, and thus there was no incentive to go hunting again. The cat turned up the ridge toward a warm cave he knew. If he had to, he would curl up anywhere on the ridge. But, like any old creature, he preferred a comfortable resting place.

The farther up the ridge he went, the heavier the forest became. The sun sank behind the western hills, and the Magadies were draped in somber shadows. The cat came to a big beech tree whose roots crawled like great snakes over the rocks into the ground. For a moment the killer stood with both front paws on a root. A sickly yellow moon that had ridden high in the sky all day became brighter as deepening twilight brought out its color and its life.

Suddenly something moved in a small pine tree about a hundred feet ahead. The cat turned his yellow eyes in that direction, and sniffed for the scent of whatever had made the motion. At first he could neither see nor smell anything; like all cats his powers of scent were not strong. Then the wind shifted strongly in his direction, and brought him the scent of roosting grouse. The grouse were in the pine, not far from the ground.

The cat licked his chops. Long ago he had established preferences in the food his wild home offered. When he was hungry enough anything was acceptable. But, even when he was not hungry, he would still eat grouse, squirrels or any fat young thing.

For ten minutes, while twilight steadily deepened, the cat stood with his paws on the beech root. He knew the game he was hunting, knew that nothing was warier or harder to catch. When night lulled the grouse

into a sense of security he would make his stalk.

The wind, as though especially to favor the killer cat, continued to blow from the tree to him. The tantalizing odor of the grouse—the cat knew that they were young ones or else they would not be so foolish as to roost close to the ground—tickled his nostrils. His short tail jerked excitedly.

The moon riding overhead sprayed the forest floor only at those places where it could find an opening through the interlaced tops of the trees, and for the most part left the woods in pitch darkness. But the cat could see. As soon as it was fully dark, he began to creep forward. Going around the moonlit places, absolutely silent, he stalked toward and came to the pine.

Looking into its branches, he saw the five dark shapes that were young bob-tailed grouse roosting side by side. One of the birds stirred nervously, and clucked in his sleep.

The cat crouched so low that he seemed to melt into the leaves, and suddenly sprang upward. He clasped the trunk close to the birds, and struck with his right front paw. One grouse tumbled to the ground, thrashed a moment in the leaves there, and was still. The other four rose to their feet while their alarmed clucking traveled out into the night. The cat struck again, and a second grouse fell from the roost. A third time the cat's lightninglike front paw flashed out, and got another grouse.

The remaining two took blundering wing into the night. Springing from the trunk, the cat caught one in midair and brought it to the earth with him. Growling savagely, he lay for a moment with the fluttering bird between his paws. Then he bit its head off and ate it. One by one he ate the others, gulping the hot flesh down and gorging himself on the four murdered woodland babies.

After the last bone was cracked and eaten, the cat felt logy and not disposed to walk any more. Returning to the big beech, he curled up in the leaves at the base of its trunk. For three hours he slept uneasily. Then all the rich food he had eaten did to him exactly what it would do to any other creature—made him sick. He awoke, and walked uncomfortably a little away from the tree. But he was physically too miserable for action, and too sick for restful sleep. All night he lay snatching what sleep he could. But, even when he slept, vivid dreams chased one another through his head so that he did not rest.

With morning the sickness had departed. But a restless night and illness had served to whet the killer's temper to a more savage height than it had ever reached before.

FOR the first time in many days the cat's luck changed. He had traveled scarcely a hundred yards from where he had made his night's bed when he saw a yearling deer grazing in a wintergreen patch. Creeping from one tree trunk to another, the cat reached the edge of the wintergreens. Flattening himself there, he waited while the deer grazed close to him. The deer, a small buck, was scarcely a yard away when the cat sprang.

At exactly the same second the deer snorted and threw his head up. The cat's extended claws plowed down his shoulder and left bloody furrows there. But the deer, white tail curved over his back, bounded through the trees to safety.

Angered because he had missed his strike, the cat ran after him for a few yards. But trying to run a

deer down was futile and he knew it. He stopped, while his bob tail jerked angrily back and forth.

A continuous angry growl simmered in the cat's chest when he prowled down the hill looking for new game. And it was the noise that warned the next game he saw, a snowshoe rabbit that was nibbling soft shoots from a bush. The rabbit went hopping away when the cat was still thirty feet from him, and again the cat gave chase. But the snowshoe went out of sight in a tangled thicket of laurel.

For a bit, senseless with rage, the cat ripped and tore at the thick brush, biting sticks through with his fangs and clawing the earth. He charged back and forth through the thicket, looking for the snowshoe. But the rabbit remained safely hidden.

After an hour the cat left the thicket and ran recklessly down the hill. He had no special destination, was only looking for something else to attack. But the very recklessness of his mad quest blocked its success. The game he saw and tried to catch always smelled or heard him before he could strike.

Shortly after noon the cat caught a chipmunk. The little striped rodent perched on top of a moss-covered rock, chirping and jerking its tail excitedly. Springing sideways, the cat gained the top of the rock and pinned the chipmunk under his flying paw. He seized it with his jaws and tossed the tiny body high into the air. When the chipmunk came down, he picked it up and tossed it again. Then, disdainful of such game, he tore it to bits and left it.

Twice more the cat tried to stalk deer, and both times they eluded him. He raced from the last one back and forth across the hillside, rushing at whatever he saw. But every time the very fury of his attack thwarted him.

For the first time in many days, night brought with it a measure of hunger. Except for the chipmunk, the cat had made no kill. And, with returning hunger, also came some hunting sense. The cat stopped his murder quest and began to look for food.

But there was no food. Cruising wildly throughout the day, the cat had touched every place on the hillside. The game that had been in the thickets and grazing grounds had left for safer places. The cat returned to the buck he had killed the day before, and sniffed at it. But the buck was cold, bloodless and stiff. Hungry, as he was, the cat's pangs were not yet keen enough to drive him into eating such unappetizing fare. Accustomed to the hot flesh and blood of fresh kills, he wanted them now.

AFTER several hours' fruitless search, the cat trotted down the slope to the valley. Thickly grown with great pine and beech trees, cut through by an ice-cold little stream of many deep pools, the valley was a favorite haunt of squirrels, rabbits and grouse.

Cautiously, exercising all his old hunting skill, the cat stalked from tree trunk to tree trunk. The wind was blowing straight up the valley, and sending the gently flowing stream back on itself in little waves and riffles. Every few feet the hunting cat paused to look and listen.

There was a slight sound from the creek, a mere splash in the water, and the cat crouched tensely behind the trunk of a huge hemlock. Slowly, an inch at a time, he raised himself to look.

A family of four small raccoons was splashing about in the shallow water at the edge of a deep pool. For a bit the cat watched them reaching under stones for crayfish, scratching at stray moonbeams that brightened the top of the pool, and splashing each other with water. The cat's mouth drooled. A baby coon was certainly as fat and tender as anything else the Magadies offered.

The cat ran forward in a silent little spurt that carried him ten feet closer to the creek. He stopped there, but the coon family was still at its harmless play. The cat ran again, this time intending that his rush carry him among the playing raccoons.

Then he was struck in the side by something that came so suddenly and unexpectedly that he recoiled in surprise and a little fear. The thing squalled raucously while it raked his side up and down with flying claws. Its teeth scored the cat's furry belly, and drew blood there. The cat ran back to the top of the creek bank to collect his scattered wits.

When he looked again, the mother coon that had attacked him was leading her four cubs across the pool. Little ripples curled back from their protruding noses as they swam. The cat watched them emerge from the pool, and heard the scraping of bark as they climbed a tree on the opposite side of the creek.

THE cat growled. He knew raccoons and had often killed them. But this time he had been caught so off guard that he just hadn't had the opportunity of doing anything. He growled again, low in his throat, and spat. The mother coon, though a formidable fighter, was no more than a third the cat's size.

For a bit the cat squatted on top of the creek bank, his short tail jerking angrily and his yellow eyes glowing as he looked at the tree into which the coons had climbed. They were high in it now, but the wind told him that they were still there. The cat could follow any place a coon could lead, and he had no mind to give up the dinner that had been so nearly his.

He walked back down to the edge of the creek and stared across it. He could swim, though he disliked water and could not handle himself very well in it. He thrust a tentative paw into the edge of the creek, and drew it back to shake the water from it. With his eyes he gauged the width of the pool. But it was too wide to jump.

The cat ran about a hundred feet up the bank to where a leaning tree hung over the creek. Grasping the bark with his claws, he climbed the tree and leaped from it to the other side of the creek. Then he went down to the tree that the coons had climbed.

It was a big hemlock, several feet through at the base. In an exposed position, getting plenty of sun, its branches grew from within two feet of the ground to the top. The cat reared to smell the trunk. The coon family was still in the tree. Again the cat growled, but this time the note of vicious amusement was in his voice. Not only could he get one of the baby coons, but he had the whole family trapped. There was no way they could come back down the tree without going past him.

The cat leaped silently into the lowest branch, and from there continued his ascent of the hemlock. Forty feet from the ground a big limb jutted out from the trunk, and the cat rested on it while he searched

the rest of the tree. At last he saw the baby coons.

Huddled close to the trunk, they were bunched together twenty feet above the cat's head. Absolutely motionless, every little black-barred pointed face was turned in breathless anticipation toward the foot of the tree. Every tiny shoe-button eye glittered. The cat licked his chops, and made ready to climb on up.

Then there was a slight motion just above his head, and something dropped to land on the limb almost beside him. The cat turned to face the mother coon.

Every hair erect, looking like a great ball of gray fur, the coon opened her fanged jaws in a fighting snarl. She bounced forward and her raking teeth scored the cat's hindquarters. The cat lowered himself to the limb again. If he could kill the old coon first, he could pick the babies off at his leisure.

STEP by step, he advanced out on the limb, and the old coon slowly backed before him. But her jaws were continuously open, ready to strike, and her black eyes constantly probed for the opening that would at least give her a chance in this fight.

As they came near its end, where the limb was more slender, it began to bend beneath their weight. The cat raised a hooked paw. He would sink it into the coon's neck, and draw her to him where he could bite through her skull to the brain. But, just as he was about to strike, the coon stopped backing and was upon him.

Eleven pounds of fighting fury, she launched herself squarely into the killer's face. The cat struck, felt his claw sink through thick skin into flesh. Squalling while she bored into his throat with her teeth, the old coon awoke the night with her raucous cries. The cat winced as her teeth pierced his neck, and sank both front claws into her flanks.

With that the coon went berserk. Reckless of the damage to herself, she clawed at the cat's eyes and her raking teeth snapped continually wherever they could get a hold. The cat backed a little before the desperate fury of her attack. His back claws groped for a hold, missed it, and for a moment they teetered back and forth on the limb. Still locked together, they plunged forty feet into the deep pool below.

The fall, and the shock of the icy water, tore the breath from the cat. He bobbed to the top and struck out for shore. But water was the old coon's element, and in it she was master of any foe. She climbed on top of the cat's head. Still clawing and biting, she forced him under and held him there as long as she could. The cat struck out with his paws but they hit only water. When he tried to bite, he gulped great mouthfuls of the icy water.

Again he came to the top, and again the old coon shoved him under. The cat moved his legs slower now, and his lungs cried out for the air that the coon would not let him have. The third time he came to the top, the coon shoved him under easily. Ten minutes later, the coon emerged from the pool and paused to lick her wounds before climbing back up the tree where her babies were all safe.

But the killer cat lay inert at the bottom of the pool.

THE END

Before anyone could stop him, Keith hurled the schooner captain over the rail, but what could he do against the other officers' guns?

Hap Riebel and his crew of claim-jumping gunnies had their pick of the California gold fields until Keith Landon, a buckaroo with a price on his head, decided it would be worth risking his life to buck their crooked game

BOOM-TOWN BUCKAROO

by CHARLES N. HECKELMANN

CHAPTER I

A FIGHT—AND A JOB

A HIGH-PITCHED scream hauled Keith Landon away from the bar. Through the dull glare of sputtering lamps suspended from the low ceiling of the Barbary Den, he made out the slender figure of a girl trapped in the bearlike hug of a dungaree-clad seaman.

Bearded miners, grim-eyed tars and half-drunk water-front drifters stopped long enough in their drinking to bellow their hard amusement. On a low platform at the end of the saloon a three-piece band set up a shrill clamor. Over the whole place hung the pall of smoke, the reek of stale whiskey.

"Give her a kiss for me, Torg!" yelled one husky sailor.

"And one for me, Schindler!" another bawled.

Out on the small cleared area where red-lipped percentage girls danced with ruddy-cheeked men, there was a stir of excitement. Keith Landon left the bar and made his way across the saloon. He saw the sailor pin the girl's head back, kiss her roughly.

Laughter, hard and unsympathetic, rippled across the room. It sent rage whipping through Landon's steel-thewed frame. This was San Francisco—tough, untamed, heartless. The Barbary Den was no better or worse than a score of other dives that littered this gold-maddened town's water front—hell joints like Shanghai Brown's, One-eyed Finnegan's, or Three-fingered Jack's at Steuart and Howard Streets.

Men gave ground grudgingly before Landon's advance. He stopped three feet away from the struggling man and girl. And for a moment a spasm of cold fear hit him.

The seaman towered well over six feet. Wide and big through the chest and shoulders, he had a craggy face, shrewd, piglike eyes and bloodless lips.

But it wasn't the size of the man that stopped Landon. It was the disturbing specter of his own back trail. In southern Arizona Keith Landon was wanted for murder. He had killed two men and the law had put Bill Carvey on his trail—Carvey who was a professional bounty hunter, a ruthless killer who never bothered to bring his victims in alive.

Keith knew the wise thing to do was to mind his own business—to steer clear of trouble. He was a stranger in a strange town. But with that very thought came the swift, sure knowledge that he wouldn't stay out of this.

Big as Torg Schindler was, he was spun about by the hard pressure of Landon's hand clamping down on his shoulder.

"If I were you, I'd leave the girl alone," Keith warned quietly.

AN angry bellow burst from the seaman's bloodless lips. He released his hold upon the girl, and, uttering a strangled cry of relief, she fled across the room.

"Who in hell asked for your opinion?" growled Schindler. His narrow, pig eyes raked Landon from head to foot. What he saw brought a sneer to his lips. There was nothing about Keith Landon's tall, slender build to arouse admiration. A battered sombrero was tipped low over his powder-gray eyes. His face was lean and bronzed, the high cheekbones accenting the gaunt irregularity of his features.

"Nobody." Keith's voice was thin and flat-toned. "Just passin' out a friendly warning."

The crowd went tense. For a moment no one spoke and no one moved. Then the big man hunched his shoulders. He shot forward like an arrow propelled from a long bow. Head lowered, legs driving like pistons, he rammed his skull against Keith's jaw.

Keith's teeth clicked together with an audible snap. He staggered backward. His chin tilted and was a perfect mark for the sledge-hammer fist that rocked it. He spilled to the floor on his shoulders, his head reeling in a red sea of pain. Instinct made him roll as he struck the puncheons.

A booted toe slammed past his ribs. Desperately, Landon grabbed that foot as it went by. He jerked savagely and the whole floor shook to the crash of Schindler's fall. Keith got to his feet. Two yards away

the big seaman scrambled up, bellowing in rage.

He came in a wild rush toward Keith. Several in the crowd sucked in their breaths. Here was the kill! But Landon stood his ground. He showed no fear. A still, penetrating light shuttered from his narrowed eyes. There was a stiff thrust to his long jaw. It was a key to an inner strength, a strong unyielding determination.

Keith blocked Schindler's whistling haymaker on his forearm, then ripped the seaman's cheek with a slashing left. He side-stepped another furious charge and hooked a right and left to Schindler's middle that took the sailor's wind.

Landon's arms began to pump in a furious blur. Fists connected with solid flesh and bone. He staggered the seaman with a right to the jaw. Schindler gave ground. Fierce exultation sang through Keith's veins. He kept smashing blows into the seaman's face until suddenly the man wasn't there any more.

Boot soles scuffed on the floor behind Landon. A snarling sailor, a belaying pin in his fist, leaped in. Liquid fire erupted in Landon's shoulder as the wooden cudgel cracked down on him. Keith pivoted. He hit his new attacker with a stiff left. The man's knee came up and dug at his groin. Nausea turned Landon's stomach upside down. Bands of white edged his lips.

He wheeled, drove in low and hard. His head struck the sailor full in the chest. Groping hands fastened on the man's thighs, heaved upward. Back muscles straining and ridging, Landon flung the man up against the bar. Then he stepped back. A six-gun flipped up into his fist.

"Who's next?" he panted. A wild light glittered in his eyes.

"Anybody else that horns in will stop a lead slug," a harsh voice warned.

LANDON wiped sweat from his brows with his sleeve. His narrow-lidded glance swept around the room and came to rest on a solid, smooth-faced man.

"Stranger, you put up one whale of a fight." The man's dark eyes studied Landon carefully. "I'm Hap Riebel—I run this joint. That big fellow was Torg Schindler, one of the best rough-an'-tumble fighters along the Barbary Coast. Skippers the *Golden Swallow*, a square rigger on the regular run to Shanghai. Come in my office. Want to talk to you."

Riebel nodded toward a back room under the balcony. He was an imposing figure in well-cut black trousers, blue chambray shirt. Keith shrugged, then followed the saloon owner across the dance floor.

"What's your handle?" Riebel queried, slamming the door to his office.

Landon hesitated. "It's Keith," he said.

"All right, Keith, I can use a gent like you. You don't look tough but you are." There was a frosty, calculating glitter in Riebel's deep-set eyes. "You're a stranger in San Francisco, so I reckon you don't know that hundreds o' ships are rottin' at the wharves waitin' for crews to man 'em. Every day clippers come from New York an' the crews jump ship to head for the gold fields. There's money to be made supplyin' skippers with sailors."

"Don't see how I'd be much help to you in that."

"That's easy." Riebel smiled. He was like a big cat, stealthy and sleek and very sure of himself. "You could work with some o' my men who make the rounds o' the water

front sellin' idle gents on the advantages of a life on the sea."

Keith gave the saloon owner a quizzical stare. Why a man who evidently had a thriving business in a gambling dive should interest himself in rounding up crews for ships anchored in the bay, he couldn't understand. But when his knotted fists came into contact with the loose change in his pockets, his thoughts took a different turn. After all, a man had to live. A job was a job.

CHAPTER II

BARBARY COAST PRISONER

KEITH LANDON'S reflections turned dismal. They cast him back to a little cattle spread in Arizona—a spread that had promised a bright future for Keith and his younger brother. Roy Landon had been content with that existence, but Keith had been wild and carefree with a constant urge to see what lay beyond the next hill. Ranch work with its line riding, roping and branding had grown tedious. Keith had drifted on, riding wherever his restless nature took him.

Trouble had caught up with him in the northern part of the State. He had hooked up with Curt Donald who owned a small outfit that was losing beef to rustlers. Keith had been riding line one day when he'd come upon the ramrod and the rancher's son wet-drivin' a bunch of their own Herefords into the badlands. The ramrod had pulled a gun. It was shoot or be shot. Landon was a little faster and blasted the man out of his saddle. He ordered young Pete Donald to throw up his hands. But the kid snarled and drove a bullet close to Keith's face.

Keith triggered, aiming to disarm him by hitting his gun arm. But the younker spurred his bronc as Landon squeezed off his shot and the bullet took the kid squarely in the chest.

It was while Landon was trying to stop the flow of blood that the rancher and the sheriff rode up. Keith told his story, but he was not believed. Pete Donald had lived long enough to frame Landon into the calaboose. He'd told a crazy yarn of coming on Keith Landon and the ramrod wet-driving stock. The younker, according to his story, had killed the ramrod but Landon had tallied the boy.

There was no chance for Keith after that. Curt Donald had a spotless reputation in northern Arizona, while Landon had been ridin' the grub line when Donald gave him a job. Nobody knew anything about Keith's back trail. So they'd stuck him in jail and set a date for his trial. Seeing how things were stacked against him, Keith hadn't waited for the trial. He'd busted out of the calaboose and drifted west.

Shortly after the jail break news of his brother, Roy, had reached him. Drought and rustlers had cleaned Roy out. Maybe with Keith there to help him buck the trouble, Roy might not have lost their spread. But he *had* lost it and the last Keith had heard was that Roy was headed for the California gold fields. It was the dim, forlorn hope that he might find Roy and make up the loss that had drawn Keith to San Francisco and made him say now: "I'll take the job, Riebel."

The saloon owner nodded and stepped outside. He returned with two tough-looking men whose names, he said, were Gil Moore and Jag Windell. Moore was a slim, sinewy man with eyes that were black and cold and unfriendly. Windell, squat and chunky, had a bullet-shaped head and very short arms.

"I got a new hand for you, Gil," said Riebel. "Name's Keith. Want you to put him to work. Schindler was in a couple hours ago sayin' he's ready to cast anchor but needs a dozen more men."

"Leave it to us." Moore's face was almost cadaverous in its gauntness. "Got any prospects outside?" He grinned wickedly.

A sly amusement tugged at Riebel's lip corners. "Yeah. Marty's workin' on a few. Better get below."

Moore and Windell nodded. Keith's glance flicked over them. Warning tugged at his mind like a trembling hand. He was beginning to wonder what he had let himself in for. Suddenly everything seemed strange and unreal.

AT a curt gesture from Moore, Keith followed the two men out of Riebel's office by way of a back door. They went through a long, dark corridor to a small room where Moore lifted up a trapdoor in the floor.

Moore led the way down a dim flight of steps palely etched in the glare of lamplight coming from somewhere below. At the bottom of the steps a low exclamation burst from Landon's lips. He found himself in a great underground cellar. Several bull's-eye lanterns were scattered about on the bare earth. But what had brought the surprised grunt to his lips was the sight of seven men huddled like limp rags in a corner. Two tough-looking hombres stood guard with Colts in their fists.

The air was damp, tangy with the smell of the sea. Keith realized that they must be very close to the waters of the bay. Why were these men prisoners? Four of them showed the blue-black bruises of cruel beatings. The other three were unconscious.

Doubt laid its dark fingers in Keith's eyes. He whirled on Moore. "What are those men doing down here?"

"They're bound for Schindler's square rigger—only they don't know it." Moore laughed callously.

"They look as if they've been beaten up."

Moore shrugged. "Reckon, they were kind o' hard to convince."

Keith faced Moore squarely, his strong features displaying a still intensity. "Let me get this straight. Just how do you fellows go about lining up a crew for one of the ships in the harbor?"

The husky's eyes glinted. "It's simple enough. Three or four of us make the rounds o' the water-front streets an' alleys. When we find a gent on his own we give him a spiel about workin' on a clipper, drawin' two hundred a month an' found. If he don't like the idea then we convince him—"

"How?" Landon's voice was thin and dry.

"With hand spikes or knuckle dusters." Again Moore laughed callously. "After he's seen the error of his ways, we pack him off to the cellar here. Besides that the barkeeps upstairs work along with us. If they spot a jigger drinkin' alone they give him a Barbary Special—a little cocktail made out o' brandy, gin and laudanum an' stiff enough to keep an hombre on ice for a week. They maneuver the gent over a trapdoor an' down he goes. Then he joins the rest o' the rats an' we row him out to the clippers."

The steely glint in Keith's eyes became more pronounced. His roving glance lifted toward the heavily beamed ceiling, saw the outlines of another trapdoor. Overhead he

could hear sounds of revelry—the drum of dancing feet, the shrill call of a drunken miner.

"An' what does Riebel get out o' all this?" He was beginning to understand this business now and it filled him with distaste.

"Plenty," put in Windell, breaking into their talk. His bullet head came close to Landon's face. "Schindler will pay Riebel as high as a hundred dollars a man delivered on board ship."

Anger broke through Landon's restraint. "So that's it!"

Injustice had always been a prod to arouse Keith Landon's quick temper. Now, as he looked at the beaten men sprawled on the earthen floor, his reason left him.

He stepped backward, ready to pit himself against the hard-eyed guards, though the odds were heavily against him. Beside him Moore leaped away with an oath.

Both halted when the trapdoor above them flipped open. Two men pitched through, struck the ground and rolled in a heap. One man lay still without moving. Above there was harsh laughter, then silence as the trapdoor closed.

THE second victim staggered to his feet. His face tipped around toward Keith, and the flickering light of the bull's-eye lanterns limned the sober, long-jawed features quite distinctly.

"Roy!" The cry welled up involuntarily from Keith's throat.

The long-jawed man jerked around. The hand that had been darting toward his gun, halted halfway down at the sound of Landon's voice. "Keith! You damned killer!"

Moore and Windell had started to close in, their guns fisted. Now they held back, narrowed eyes watching the run of this scene. Keith was shocked at the gaunt, wasted look in his brother's features.

"So you're workin' with that skunk, Riebel!" raged Roy Landon. His voice was indistinct. He staggered like a drunken man. His eyes were bloodshot. "It wasn't enough that you left me alone to fight them blasted rustlers," he went on. "You had to turn killer. An' now you've come to San Francisco to help Riebel rob me out o' my gold claim."

"You've got me all wrong, Roy," Keith protested.

"Like the devil I have! Riebel found out I had a bonanza in the hills. That damn assayer must've told him about my strike. I come into town several weeks ago to have a fling. When I got back to my claim I found two gents guardin' it with guns. They were Riebel's gun slicks with orders to keep me from workin' my diggin's."

An odd struggle went on behind Keith Landon's eyes. "If you filed on your claim they couldn't take it away from you."

"Sure, but there's a law in these diggin's that if a claim is unworked for a month it becomes open to relocation again. An' that's what Riebel's plannin'. After his gun slicks choused me off I came back to San Francisco lookin' for Riebel. This sidewinder here"—he indicated Moore—"waylaid me with a couple more crimps an' shanghaied me aboard a clipper. Ten days out we passed a square rigger bound for California. I jumped ship an' was picked up by the in-bound packet. I headed straight for this place but Riebel tricked me." Roy's voice rose to a pitch of hysterical fury. "I've got just one more day to work my claim or I lose it an', by Satan, neither you, Keith, nor anyone else, is gonna stop me."

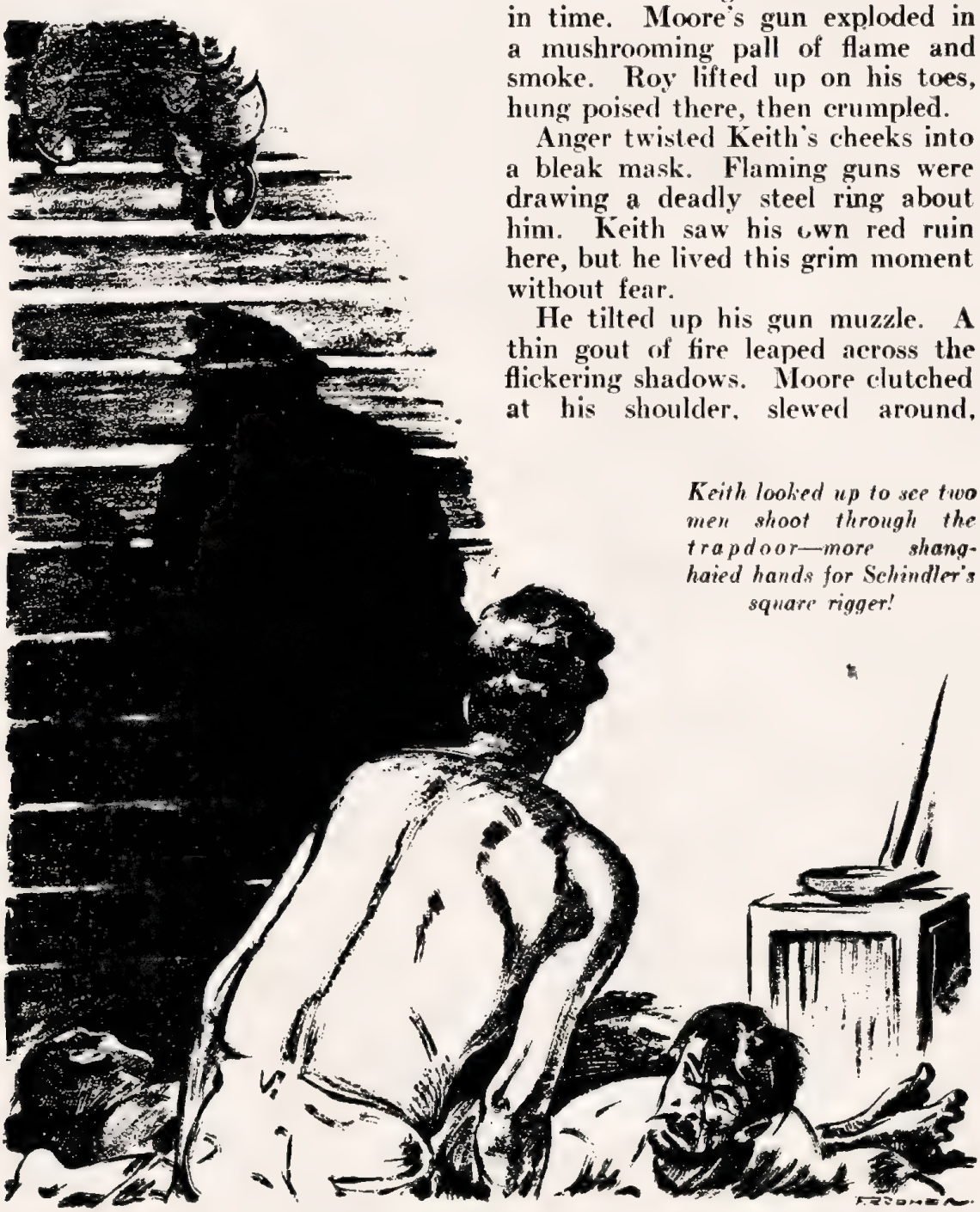
Then, with almost incredible speed, Roy Landon's arm flicked up and down. Bright-red death blazed from the black maw of his Colt. A squalling slug seared Keith's ribs, whirling him around.

Grimly Keith dug for his own weapons. He saw Moore, Windell and the other guards go for their guns. The cellar shook to the thunderous roar of cascading bullets. Keith threw down on Windell's squat shape, his six-shooter bucking and roaring. Windell's dying scream rose above the gun roar and he pitched to the ground.

Whirling, Keith saw Moore snarl an oath, then line his sights on Roy. He swiveled his gun around but not in time. Moore's gun exploded in a mushrooming pall of flame and smoke. Roy lifted up on his toes, hung poised there, then crumpled.

Anger twisted Keith's cheeks into a bleak mask. Flaming guns were drawing a deadly steel ring about him. Keith saw his own red ruin here, but he lived this grim moment without fear.

He tilted up his gun muzzle. A thin gout of fire leaped across the flickering shadows. Moore clutched at his shoulder, slewed around,



Keith looked up to see two men shoot through the trapdoor—more shanghaied hands for Schindler's square rigger!

orange tongues stabbing obliquely into the earth from his gun. Then hot steel raked the top of Keith's skull and he plunged into a bottomless black pit.

CHAPTER III.

MUTINY.

KEITH awoke to the gentle, rocking motion of a boat. He opened his eyes and pain pricked at his eyeballs, leaving its dull ache along the top of his head. Then he saw that he lay in the bottom of a flat-bottomed rowboat.

It occurred to him, then, that he was being shanghaied aboard Torg Schindler's ship.

A thick curtain of gray fog hung over the waters of the bay. No one spoke. The only sounds were the repeated wailings of fog horns, the lapping of oars in the water and the clank of oar locks.

The figure next to Keith stirred. With a shock he realized it was his brother. Roy's shirt was sticky high in the shoulder where Moore's bullet had found its mark.

"Roy, you all right?" Keith questioned anxiously.

The figure stiffened and the white, angry blur of Roy's face craned toward him. "Don't talk to me, you dirty murderer! I'm glad of one thing, though. You won't get your hands on my gold claim."

A choking coldness was in Keith's throat. Roy still considered him a killer—believed he had been in on Riebel's scheme to steal his gold claim. Roy hadn't seen his brother pitch in to help.

"Kid, you've got me all wrong," Keith said earnestly. "I'm sorry about the ranch. An' about that gold claim, I'd only heard you'd drifted out here somewhere."

An angry snort from Roy told Keith that talk was useless.

"Quit jawin', you two!" rasped Moore. He was stationed in the bow of the boat. A long-barreled gun was cradled in his gnarled fist.

Choppy waves tugged at the frail craft, lifting it to white-laced crests, then dropping it into shallow troughs. The night was eerie and silent. They passed the dark hulk of a three-masted schooner, its running light barely visible through the driving mists.

"You've got to believe me, Roy. I'm on your side." Keith spoke through slit lips. He blamed himself for this whole mess. If he hadn't gone on the drift, Roy would never have lost their ranch, and he would have never been compelled to kill two men. Somehow he had to make a break. Roy had sunk all his hopes in a gold claim. Now the kid was about to lose that, too.

He never knew whether Roy heard him or not. The younger man did not answer. When Keith looked around, the rowboat was scraping the sides of a great square rigger. Through the mist he could see the broad prow, the dim flare of a lantern. Someone shouted from the deck and Moore answered gruffly and leaped up to grab the clipper's anchor rope. The light craft dipped up and down in the swells wallowing in from the Pacific.

A Jacob's ladder was lowered from the deck. Moore hefted one of the limp men to his shoulder and started up the ladder. One of the rowers, a husky, dark-bearded man, followed with another victim. Then Moore ordered Keith and his brother to go up.

ON deck Keith glanced with pity at the unconscious forms of the men who had been drugged. Then Torg Schindler's towering shape loomed up through the fog.

"Here they are, Torg," grunted Moore. "Let's have the cash an' we'll be gettin' back."

The brawny sea captain spat a stream of tobacco juice on deck—his opinion of the shanghaied crew. "They ain't worth fifty bucks a head."

"But you'll pay a hundred," said Moore. There was no compromise in his tone.

Suddenly Schindler recognized Landon. "So it's you—you mangy pup!" A cruel brutality warped the seaman's cheeks. A cold and utterly vicious amusement danced in his eyes—anticipation of evil pleasure to come. "Hell, I'd have offered Riebel two hundred for you, friend. I'm gonna enjoy makin' a sailor out o' you. When I'm finished with you, you'll be food for the sea gulls."

The hulking seaman strode a pace nearer. His big hands clenched until they were like knotted clubs of stone.

Keyed like this, surrounded by the mute threat of death, all mercy and caution went out of Keith. His muscles began to press outward. He saw how Moore and Schindler were stationed, facing him a bare ten feet from the rail.

Keith had a feeling of impatience for waiting, a reckless disregard for peril. It was that quality that stirred him now, made him yell:

"At them, Roy!" He hoped his brother would understand. It was a wild risk. The odds were better than even that they'd never get out of this alive.

But Landon threw that reflection aside. He charged full into Schindler. Head down, shoulders hunched, he hit the seaman with all the power of his one-hundred-and-ninety-pound frame. Schindler shot backward, a gusty breath spilling from his deep chest cavity.

Keith hit him in the belly, knocked him against the rail. He ducked low, got his hands on Schindler's wide hips and heaved. The seaman's huge frame teetered like a seesaw on the rail, then toppled into the sea.

Behind him Keith heard the scuff of boot soles. Moore raced at him. Orange tongues lashed a fiery path before the big husky. Lead whispered angrily past Keith's face. Then he was grappling with Moore, striving to get a grip on the man's gun arm, while the black-bearded hombre started yelling.

Out of the tail of his eye Keith saw muzzle light leap from the bore of the black-bearded man's gun. But the lead didn't stop Roy. He leaped in, hit the man on the jaw and knocked him to the deck.

The breathtaking shock of a knee slicing upward into his stomach, brought Keith's attention swiftly back to Moore. He twisted Moore's gun out of his grasp. For the space of a minute they stood toe to toe, slugging away.

A hard blow to the jaw made lights reel in front of Keith's eyes. Moore surged in, hammered him again. Dimly Keith saw Roy stagger up and come toward him. The black-bearded man lay motionless on the deck.

A loud clamor along the other end of the deck warned of the approach of the rest of the ship's officers. Keith braced and flattened Moore with a short right. Then he yelled:

"Jump, Roy!"

CHAPTER IV

BULLETS FOR A BOUNTY HUNTER

WITH one hand on the rail, Keith vaulted into the sea. From the deck a brace of guns began to chop through the fog. Keith rose to the

surface after a deep plunge and struck out with his arms. Nearby Roy's head bobbed up. The rowboat was close to the clipper and slugs began to whine over the heads of the fugitives from that direction.

Keith reached his brother. "Swim for shore. This fog is a break for us." His mouth edged in a tough grin.

But there was no answering smile on Roy's face. "Get away from me!" he muttered. His eyes were feverish, his voice thick and unnatural.

A gun spoke out of the mist and Roy gasped in pain. He sagged and went under.

"Get after them!" a voice roared from the deck of the clipper. "They're close to the boat."

Keith felt his stomach turn over. Had that stray bullet finished Roy? Abruptly the fog seemed to have no air in it. A cold chunk of ice seemed to freeze up Keith's vitals.

He plunged forward through the white-capped waves of the bay. Getting an arm under Roy's limp form, he flipped him over on his back. Then he threw his right arm across his brother's chest, anchoring it under the left armpit, and kicked out with his legs.

Guns continued to break the night. The fog swirled in thicker than ever.

Then the rumble of voices, the slap of oars came to Keith's ears. He stopped, turned on his back, kicking his feet out gently to keep Roy and himself afloat. How close would that boat come? Icy dread howled up and down his tense nerve centers. The mutter of voices became more distinct.

"See anythin' of the polecats?" growled Schindler.

Keith stiffened. The skipper had been picked up by the rowboat. It slid soundlessly through the swells, but remained invisible behind the dripping gray shroud. For at least ten agonizing minutes after that, Keith waited, keeping Roy afloat, not daring to move.

At last, when he could stand the suspense no longer, Keith struck out with his arm and legs and renewed the laborious struggle toward the shore. Minutes dragged by—minutes filled with a never-ceasing dread and body-racking effort. Conflicting thoughts tortured Keith. He must not go down. He must reach the shore and get Roy to a sawbones. Just a little farther now. The shore couldn't be far away.

Time stretched on like a taut string and still there was no end to the brackish water, no lifting of the cloying fog—fog that draped wet tentacles about a man's throat. Every stroke became an agony of strain and ebbing strength for Keith. But he couldn't die like this, he told himself feverishly. He had to make one last attempt to square accounts with Roy. His throat burned. He was all dry inside. The fog was turning black—or was that a trick of his dimming consciousness?

SUDDENLY Keith's flailing hand encountered the barnacle-studded piles of a wharf. He uttered a sob of joy. He hung on desperately and rested. The shore was close by.

Ten minutes later, Roy's limp body draped over his shoulder, Keith Landon lurched along San Francisco's narrow water-front streets and alleys. Once again he was thankful for the fog that shrouded his movements. He went past Shanghai Brown's and Three-fingered Jack's hell dives.

Two blocks farther on, Keith stopped at a rickety frame shack and left Roy with the sawbones inside.

Stalking through the shadows,

after completing this part of his mission, Keith was not at all sure that the doctor would not deliver Roy into some crimp's hands. But he had something important to do, so he had to take the chance that the medico was on the level.

Soaked to the skin and shivering in the damp air, Keith felt washed out and empty. His hair made an unruly cowl over his eyes. His frayed nerves and spent body cried out for rest. But he couldn't stop now. Roy had said he had until sunset tomorrow to work on his gold claim or it would be open to relocation. Keith didn't need a diagram to know that Riebel, satisfied that Roy was out of the way, would be all set to file on that claim at sunset. But Keith meant to change Riebel's plans.

When he came to Steuart Street, Landon went into the Barbary Den. It was jam-packed with roaring, yelling men. They milled back and forth between the bar and the glass-littered tables.

Keith Landon was a grim, ragged figure, yet he evoked little more than passing interest—there were so many other ragged wharf rats in the dive. A fierce surge of exultation boomed across his chest when he saw Hap Riebel move from the roulette table and go up the stairs. The saloon owner was followed by another man with double-rigged guns.

Keith didn't have a gun, but that was the least of his cares. He shouldered through the crowd and sauntered up the stairs.

Abruptly he found himself in a darkened corridor.

"This is as far as you go!" a thin voice warned.

Keith halted, his eyes straining toward the guard's huge bulk. He caught the faint gleam of gun metal. His lips hardened and without warning he leaped forward. His right fist traveled a short distance and exploded against the man's chin. He punched his knee into the fellow's middle, hit him again solidly and followed him to the floor.

When Keith got up he had the guard's six-gun. He cat-footed along the darkened hall, turned toward a yellow flare of light. Voices drifted through the panel. Keith detected Riebel's harsh tones and went

through the door in one great bound. The wood splintered and crashed, pitching Keith to his knees, but he rose swiftly and his six-gun canted upward to cover Hap Riebel—and Bill Carvey, the professional bounty hunter!

"LANDON!" Carvey blared. He was a thick-browed man with washed-out blue eyes, a short neck and a flattened nose. "I've been lookin' for you." His shoulders shook. His whole body seemed to coil down over the bone-handled Colts strapped on his hips.

"So I heard," murmured Keith. His gaunt face was bleak. He might have known that this human bloodhound would catch up with him. But what was Carvey's connection with Riebel?

"Riebel," grunted Carvey, "when I got your letter about the easy pickin's out here, I never thought I'd run into this kind of luck." Though the bounty hunter was talking to Riebel, his pale eyes never left Landon. He remained in a crouch like a sleek panther poised to spring. Though Keith's gun muzzle was lined on his chest, Carvey's manner was full of contempt and cold speculation. "This jigger's worth a thousand bucks as buzzard bait. I'll cut you in on that."

"Claw for the ceiling, Carvey," Landon warned. He stood there tall and powerful against the light. "You ain't collectin' any bounties tonight. Riebel, here, is gonna take me up to the gold fields to my brother's claim. Roy's got till sunset tomorrow to work his lode or it'll be open to relocation. Riebel's gonna help Roy hold on to the claim."

Keith's taciturn glance shifted relentlessly to Riebel's pasty cheeks. Then the rasp of metal against leather jerked Keith to one side. The bounty hunter was drawing! One second Carvey's arms bent at the elbows, then they dissolved into a blur and his guns began spouting fire.

A heavy hand was laid deep across Keith's middle. Blinding pain hazed his vision. He clamped his teeth together while the room rocked to the shuddering concussion of the bounty hunter's shots.

Keith fired so closely upon the echo of Carvey's gun thunder that the three shots blended into one prolonged burst of sound. Keith's hip seemed to be enveloped in moving flame. Then Carvey was falling, a reddening welt sliding down his face from his hair line.

Riebel leaped to one side and his six-gun spat its crimson streak. A slug droned past Landon's ear before he wheeled and dropped hammer. Riebel shrilled in pain. Red gushed from his smashed wrist. He dropped the gun as if it were a hot poker.

"That's all, Riebel," Keith said curtly. He flicked a swift glance toward Carvey's limp form, then jerked his head at the saloon owner. "Get movin'. You an' me are goin' for a ride. We'll go out o' here by the back stairs."

CHAPTER V

CLAIM JUMPER'S NEMESIS

CURSING savagely and wrapping a bandanna about his bullet-scoured wrist, Riebel lurched out into the hall. A loud clamor rose from the lower floor. Boots trampled the stairs.

Keith and Riebel went down the rear stairs to an alley and on to a pair of saddle horses drowsing at the hitch rack of an adjoining saloon.

A curt command sent Riebel into the saddle of a dun gelding while Landon mounted a rangy roan.

"Take me to Roy's claim—and don't say you don't know where it is," Keith ordered. There was an uncompromising note in his voice, but the gray strain of exhaustion dulled his features. His wounded side was torturing him.

"It's a long ride, friend," said Riebel. A slanting speculation rode his glance. "You'll never make it. Carvey's bullet carved your gizzard an' it spells your finish. I'm gonna enjoy polishin' you off when you can't hold that hogleg on my back."

Keith swayed in the saddle. Weakness hit him like a physical blow and he had to grip the pommel. His lips flared against his teeth. "Ride. An' remember, if we meet anybody keep your trap shut. One wrong move an' I shoot."

Hours passed—long, dragging hours that took the riders into rugged foothills. Dawn came. The hot brassy sun fought through the morning mists, lifted toward its zenith. The horses were weary. Foam flecked their muzzles.

Keith still managed to hold a frail grip on his senses. Sometimes his eyes refused to focus, but he never relinquished his hold upon his gun. Then out of a dim black mist he saw Riebel gesture and slide out of his saddle.

Freeing his boots from the stirrups, Keith started to climb down. Suddenly the tree-dotted ridges gyrated before his eyes and he fell to the ground. Riebel whirled and plunged toward Keith.

"Not yet, Riebel," Keith said thinly. He rolled and brought his Colt up.

A rifle cracked suddenly and a bullet sped over Landon's head. He charged forward, rammed the gun bore into Riebel's middle.

"I expected somethin' like this." Keith saw a puff of smoke from a stand of chaparral. "Come down out o' there with your hands in the air or Riebel gets a bullet in his belly!" he yelled. These were the gun-slick guards Roy had spoken about.

Sudden fear clawed at the saloon owner. "Martin! Concroy!" he yelled. "Come down. He's got his sights lined on me!"

Silence hung over the vast wilderness. Finally, two men lurched out of the brush, their hands in the air.

"Unbuckle your gun belts," ordered Keith. "One at a time." The men growled, but complied. "Now clear out. An' if you bring help for Riebel, I'll kill him."

Keith waited then, gritting his teeth against the pain that swayed him, until the men had gone to their horses and galloped off.

"Now, Riebel, I want you to hunt for the monuments to this claim. I'd like to be certain this lode really belongs to my brother an' was staked."

Keith's eyes were staring wildly. Even his breathing was labored, sending sharp twinges up through his chest. He sank to the ground, then slid his haunches across the rocky earth until his shoulders braced the bole of a slender pine.

Every time he tipped his head down, grass and rocks swam before his eyes. Could he last long enough to make Riebel work on the claim? Or would he pass out?

Riebel was questing through the brush and rubble. Finally the big man stumbled up. He threw a wadded hunk of paper at Landon's feet. It was a location notice. Swiftly Keith read his brother's name to-

gether with the date of priority claim.

"All right, Riebel. I'm gettin' weaker—that should make you happy." Keith's voice was taut with strain, and his cheeks were tight with the gray-green hue of desperation. "But I aim to stick it out long enough to see you swing a pick into that slate formation against the cliff. Here's your pay. That makes it legal." He reached into his pocket and flipped a silver dollar on the ground at Riebel's feet.

HATE deepened the bitter curves at the sides of the saloon owner's mouth. "You poor fool! You need proof—witnesses that the claim was worked by your brother or a man he hired."

Keith gestured with the gun. "Heft that pick!" Weakness pushed the edge of his lips together. The Colt in his fist grew heavy. The lower part of his body seemed to be burning up. Exhaustion was like a great tide in him, surging up to the top of his skull, leaving him faint. Riebel stood immobile, regarding Landon with a vicious and calculating intensity.

"Don't turn around, Landon!"

The command brought a cold tremor quaking through Keith. In spite of the warning, his red-misted eyes swiveled around to the thick growth of manzanita on the low ridge to his right.

"I'm here to collect that bounty on your head." The sound of that voice came as if from a tremendous distance. Then Keith saw a break in the bushes. He glimpsed the long rifle barrel poking toward him and the leering, triumphant face of Bill Carvey above it. The man hunter had a bloody bandage about his head.

"Carvey!" exclaimed Riebel. The tension went out of the saloon owner and wicked pleasure filled his features. "I'm damned glad to see you."

Bitter despair blew through Keith Landon. It was a numbing shock to learn that Carvey was still alive. He stared at death down the long barrel of the bounty hunter's rifle. Steel bands were contracting around his heart. He couldn't hope to bring the barrel of his Colt around in time to beat Carvey's shot.

"Don't move—any of you!" This was a new, hate-ridden voice—and familiar to Keith.

His eyes leaped to the other side of the wide gorge. He saw Roy slide down out of the saddle of a big roan. Even at this distance he noted what a toll the long ride and the bullet wound had taken from his brother. The kid was acting on sheer nerve. His face was haggard, ridged by weariness and pain. Blood had dried on his forehead.

"So the wolves are quarrelin' over the spoils," Roy gritted. He took refuge behind a boulder. His six-gun menaced Carvey across the gorge, and the two men in the shallow depression. "Riebel, I got back in time to queer your plans. I'm savin' my claim. But first I'm gonna give you the killin' you deserve—along with my sidewinder brother—"

Carvey's rifle barrel up on the ridge dipped swiftly. The canyon shook to the reverberating roar of a shot. Keith slewed to one side and a hot rush of blood dimmed his vision. The shock of fresh lead hit him high in the shoulder, hurled him against the trunk of the tree.

Through a gray mist Keith saw Riebel flatten out and go diving for one of the six-guns dropped by the two guards who had been watching the gold claim. Then Roy was going into action with his Colt. Bluish smoke drifted into the gorge, shot

through with red-winking tongues of flame.

Somehow, though the effort was sheer agony, Keith dragged his gun up. He braced it against his hip, seeing how Riebel's weapon bucked and roared. Bullets spattered close, tugged at his clothes, nicked his flesh. Then his thumb slipped the hammer. Red lances raced raggedly away from his body.

Then the Colt sagged in his fist. His head tipped down. Water seemed to flow in over his brain. He dropped through a great well of pain and oblivion.

KEITH! Keith! Can you hear me?" Weights were pressing down on Keith Landon's eyelids. He heard the voice again—pleading and urgent. At last he opened his eyes.

"Roy!" Keith's voice was a thready murmur. Roy was bending over him. Another face, one that was unfamiliar, pushed close. "You're all right? They didn't—"

"No." Weariness was in Roy's voice but fierce hope was there, too. "You killed Riebel. I got the other one. Dammit, I had my sights lined on you, Keith, but I couldn't pull the trigger. When that gent fired at you I went haywire."

Worry pulled at Keith's bullet-torn frame. "The claim! Not sundown yet, Roy. I . . . I wanted Riebel to work it for you . . . paid him . . . silver dollar. Ordered him to tear away at that quartz vein . . . but there wasn't any witness."

"There'll be a witness now," Roy assured him. "I brought Tim Corbett, the assistant recorder, out from San Francisco. He'll watch while I work." There was a pregnant pause. The rest of Roy's talk seemed to come with an effort. "Thanks for pullin' me out o' the bay an' leavin' me with the sawbones. I . . . I hightailed out here figgerin' to stop you from filin' on the claim. Instead, I find you fightin' my battle."

"I owed you that."

"That other jigger—who was he?"

Grinding agony pounded within Keith. He fought the wave of dark mist that floated in over his vision. "Bill Carvey was his name . . . bounty hunter . . . after that reward on my head."

"Keith, I owe you an apology." Roy was on his knees, bending over his brother. He had bared Keith's chest and was wadding a cloth torn from his own shirt into the ragged bullet hole in Landon's shoulder. "I'm beginnin' to see things straight for the first time in weeks. Reckon you were tryin' to help me when Riebel trapped me. I was crazy mad—thought you were after the mine—that you were workin' with Riebel. I even figgered you for a killer. I know there's a bounty on your head in Arizona. But nobody'll ever make me believe again you ever murdered a man."

"I didn't. It was self-defense," Keith replied weakly, losing ground in his fight to retain consciousness. "I . . . I'll tell you about it . . . sometime."

"Yeah," said Roy. He was grinning. There was admiration in his glance. "Right now I'm sendin' Corbett here to pack you off to the nearest sawbones. Gotta take care o' you—'cause you an' me are gonna be kept mighty busy workin' this lode."

Keith Landon smiled at that. The darkness seemed to leave him. For the first time in many months he was at peace.

THE END

In the midst of Crowhop's throng of ruthless hardcases, could an honest bullet find its way to the sinister figure who wore that

SOMBRERO OF DEATH

by JACK STERRETT

"Look, Tom," Eustace said. "You'll play for boothill walkin' into that town tonight." Tom nodded, but he still intended to go ahead.

TOM ROBIN and Bill Eustace hunkered on the brow of a hill overlooking the cow town of Crowhop while purple dusk slowly filled the valley settlement. Squatted on their heels, they rested without speaking while their cow ponies nibbled around on milkweed and a few tufts of brown grass. Occasionally, without looking at the materials he handled, one or the other of them would roll himself a quirly. The steady and speculative stare of their sun-squinted eyes remained always on Crowhop, however.

It was along about the fifth or sixth cigarette, when darkness had finally obscured the town and the lights of its hot spots had begun to flicker, that Bill Eustace finally cleared his throat and spoke.

He was a chunky, hard-faced hom-

bre with china-blue eyes, a blond longhorn mustache and heavily freighted double-holster gun belt around the hips. He had the almost feminine softness of voice possessed by many gun fighters. "Look, Tom," he said slowly, "you'll play for boot-hill walkin' into that town tonight. It's Saturday. Every cowpoke in the country's been driftin' in for the last two hours."

Tom Robin's brown eyes were as hard as agate, and his mouth was in an inflexible line. "That's the way I want her," he said roughly, "—full of folks!" He scowled. "Especially Shaw Benson and his crowd."

Eustace shrugged. "It's your funeral. I've done my gun-fannin' in a lot of tough situations, but I pass on this one. It's all yours. Only thing is—don't forget I'll be watchin' every move you make."

"An' that's the way I want her, too," Tom growled. He stood up abruptly, flipped the single big .45 from its holster at his right hip and examined its loads carefully. He tested the action of the spring, spun the cylinder a few times and sheathed the weapon again with a snaky smoothness of motion which bespoke long practiced habit. He seemed completely unaware of the close regard of Bill Eustace's eyes as he caught up his horse, tightened the cinch and stepped up to his seat. But as he looked down, the grimness of his features broke momentarily into a smile. "Adios, compadre. If I'm unlucky, don't bury me at all —just pickle my bones in alcohol!"

Then he rode away in the dark.

IN Crowhop, Tom eased down at the crowded hitch rail in front of the Pink Hog. As he tied the reins over the rail and stepped up to the sidewalk, his hand slapped for the holster for the familiar feel of its heavy freight. He'd need to be plumb ready tonight—and fast.

A glance both ways showed no citizens on the sidewalk who might follow too closely on his heels when he entered the saloon. Stepping lithely across the sidewalk, he pushed open the batwing doors, slid inside in one motion and stood with his back to the wall to the right of the entrance.

Buppy Monson, barkeeping, saw him first and made an involuntary move for the shotgun under the counter—then changed his mind when he saw the stone look in Tom's face. Buppy froze, and the fixed stare of his prominent and colorless eyes caught the attention of others in the place. Gradually a hush fell through the smoke-filled room—and, not so gradually, a space cleared between Tom and the bar.

In the silent watchful crowd on either side of the deadly lane that had opened for him, Tom saw the cruel and squint-eyed faces of men who would as soon as not shoot him in the back. But that was a chance he had to take. A big part of Crowhop was here waiting to judge him. And he had to show confidence, a clear conscience and fearlessness.

He tipped back his hat and grinned easily at the crowd. "Howdy, boys," he drawled. "You see—I'm back. Didn't hit the owlhoot as some swore I would. Just cleared out till that lynch crowd cooled off—then moseyed right back to face the music and to call them that call me killer damned liars!"

As he spoke, he strolled carelessly down the cleared space to the bar, looked Buppy Monson between the eyes and grinned mockingly. "Three fingers of mule-kick, Bup—and don't serve it with a shotgun chaser!"

The drink in his left hand, he swung around, cocked his booted

heel over the brass rail and leaned back on his elbows. As swiftly as he made the move, all humor and carelessness were gone from his face. His eyes were agates once more, and his lips a straight line.

"All right," he said to the room at large, "there's no use funnying along any further. I ain't here for humor—but to keep an appointment I made with the man who's been naming me murderer. I wrote him a letter to make sure he'd be here tonight! Where's Shaw Benson?"

"Take it easy, kid," croaked Buppy Monson behind him. "You're achin' for fight, and you've already shot one man in this town!"

But Tom was paying no attention to Buppy. For suddenly out of the crowd facing him, a short and bull-shouldered man thrust himself with a snort of anger—a man with bristling close-cropped hair, dead green eyes and a perpetually smiling mouth which had as much softness and humor as a line hacked from granite. Even as furious as he was now, Shaw Benson smiled unnaturally.

"Kid, did you call me?"

Tom's head was thrown back, his brown eyes hard almost to the point of ugliness, as he watched Benson with the poised wariness of a hawk. "I'm happy to discover," he said softly, "that I was wrong in judging you wouldn't have the guts to face me here. Can you blame me for misjudging a man who always shoots from ambush—and aims for the back!"

Shaw Benson's grimace twisted in fury. For an instant it looked as though he might lose control and make a slash to bring his gun into play.

But Benson let out the explosion in a roar of rage. "Tom Robin, you're a murdering rustler! You rustled John Craft's yearlings for months—then shot him in the back when he'd almost caught you fake-branding some of the stock you'd stolen! You jumped town before the charges could be pressed. I ain't arguing with any killer kid! Hey, sheriff!"

Tom grinned maliciously and leaned back against the bar. "Shaw, you're playing true to form. Can't drive yourself to gunplay when a man's face is toward you." He craned his neck and grinned again. "Who's that hiding behind you—Thunder Bates? Thunder, how's sheriff business? You be good, and maybe Shaw'll see you're re-elected. You aiming to arrest me tonight?"

From the corner of his eye, Tom could see that his boldness and impudence had gained him friends. All of this crowd, a few days ago, had been ready to lynch him under Benson's harrying. Now a good many of them were beginning to enjoy the wealthy cattleman's discomfort. Only Benson's own men still looked grim-faced and savage.

Crowhop's bony and gangling sheriff hesitantly stepped forward, cleared his throat and spoke with disconcerting suddenness in the booming bellow which had earned him his name. "Reckon I'll have to arrest you, Tom. Don't like to—you and me been friends. But you gotta stand trial."

"Oh, I don't object," Tom drawled slowly, eyes hard on Shaw Benson's. "Fact is that's what I'm here for—to tell what I've learned about John Craft's murder and the rustlings that led to it. Only thing is, I hoped I could spill those things here and now. Tell about Shaw Benson's being—"

A hoarse shout of warning jerked Tom's eyes to one side. For the breath of an instant, he froze. A lantern-jawed man with cat's eyes was flipping a big six-gun from his

holster with deadly speed. He had the killer look and killer deadliness—and he was glaring straight at Tom.

Whose shout had warned him, Tom guessed. It had come from the front of the saloon, near the door. Even so, Bill Eustace had been too late.

Too late for Tom to draw, anyway. But not for defensive action. Because Tom was ducking aside with dazzling swiftness. And his hand, streaking down, did not attempt to draw his weapon from its holster—merely smashed down on the butt, swiveling the muzzle upward and tripping the hammer in the same lightning gesture.

By the time-saving of that gesture, Tom's gun talk won out. His weapon's roar drowned out that of the cat-eyed killer's, and the man stumbled back with a wordless cry. Blood stained the fingers with which he clutched at his chest, and he was dead when the man who caught him lowered him to the floor.

The muzzle of Tom's gun, pointing upward from the swiveled half-breed holster in which it cradled, and weaving from side to side, dispelled any lead-throw notions anybody else in the crowd might have had. Looking green around that permanent smile of his, Shaw Benson gingerly but hastily removed his fingers from the butt of his own six-gun.

Tom's eyes bored his enemy. "Shaw—that gun-slinger one of your hired hands?"

But bawling Thunder Bates supplied the answer. "Tom," he roared protestingly, "you've killed another man! An' this time it's Shaw Benson's new ramrod!"

"Ramrod!" Tom snorted. "Professional gun fighter!" His eyes were cold and contemptuous on Benson's. "I had a notion," he said deliberately, "that if I started anything at all here, gun talk'd begin to tell the true story about John Craft. And that true tale wouldn't tell that Tom Robin was the killer—but Shaw Benson. I thought I might spill my proofs—here—but I reckon I'll let Thunder lock me safe in jail. So's I'll live to tell my story in court!"

Eyes locked on Benson's frozen and sickly stare, Tom walked toward the gangling huge Thunder Bates. "All right, sheriff—take me to the cooler."

And as the confused, half-stampeded Thunder complied by quickly taking him by the arm and hustling him through the murmuring and jostling crowd, two things stood bright in Tom's mind: the swallowing, half-choking motions of Shaw Benson's throat; and the sight of Bill Eustace, inconspicuous in the dark outside the saloon door.

ALONE, in the black dark of a cell in Crowhop's brick jailhouse, Tom had opportunity to muse upon his actions and realize the terrible chances he had taken. In warning Shaw Benson that he was returning to Crowhop to accuse him of the murder of John Craft, Tom had laid a murder trap for himself to step into. Then he had stepped into it—deliberately!

Well, he had pulled out of that trap with a whole skin. Shaw Benson's hired gun fighter had put his boss in a bad light by premature gunplay, and Benson's own furious loss of temper had done the cattleman no good. Part of the town sided with Tom, now.

But the situation was still not without its blood-chilling danger. As he sat on the edge of his steel cot in the dark, Tom could hear the mad yammering of a lynch crowd downstreet. Probably this time Shaw Benson would try to control those

strangle-hungry coyotes who followed his kills. Even in rough and ready Crowhop, it wouldn't set too well with honest citizenry to have a Shaw Benson crowd go lynch-crazy for the second time within a month. No—Shaw Benson would have figured out a far better way of securing Tom's immediate death. But could he control that crowd's liquor insanity? Would Thunder Bates be any good at all against the rush of a mob?

Suddenly Tom jerked rigid as something heavy flew unseen between the bars of his cell window and fell with a muffled and heavy thud at his feet. He groped for it, then knew it instantly for what it was—a fully loaded .45 wrapped in a big silk bandanna. There was no use of making any effort to see out. The window was high beyond his reach. But Tom struck a match and had his answer. The bandanna was the one Bill Eustace had been wearing all day. This was a warning—Shaw Benson was headed this way!

Tom heard, too, the whistled lilt of an old trail song, fading away in the night outside the window. His heart leaped. Good old Bill Eustace was working for him! A man never had a better pard!

He didn't have long to wait. Maybe a half hour after he had picked up the heavy six-gun and thrust it inside his shirt, he heard a murmur of voices in the outer office of the jail, heard Thunder Bates' loud bawl, then a sudden scuffling of feet, a thud—and dead silence.

HE was pretending sleep when lantern light flared into his cell, and a short and stocky masked man wearing a huge white sombrero peered in at him. Under lowered lids, Tom probed the man's disguise and saw through it instantly. Shaw Benson! The man never trusted anybody but himself to perform his dirtiest and back-shootingest jobs! And it was this devilish trait that was leading him straight into Tom's trap.

Well—that disguise was plenty good. He looked like a short and indescribably filthy Mex peon.

The squat, white-hatted figure rapped softly on the cell bars with a bundle of keys, and Tom sat up and rubbed his eyes. "Hola, amigo! —sh-h-h!" Shaw Benson hissed in a fair imitation of a Mexican's sing-song English. "Look, Señor Tom Robin—here ees keys to el jusgado—for you to escape. I 'ave come from friends of yours—no? Behol'—I am to releasing you!"

Having gained Tom's interested attention, Shaw Benson unlocked his cell with many a flowery gesture. A black silk handkerchief completely covered his face. But beneath it, Tom could visualize that constant ghastly smile.

Tom pretended to hesitate as he approached the opened door. "Who are you?" he growled. "Where's Thunder Bates?"

The masked man shrugged with Latin eloquence. "I am nobody—only go-between, no? I am paid by your friends to see that you are escaping free. They wish it not that you should be lynched in this town. And they ask it not how I am escaping you. So—ha-ha! Thunder Bates has a big lump on hees head. Maybe he is not wake up, I don't know!"

Sure, Shaw Benson, Tom thought grimly, and you don't care, either. It doesn't bother you at all as to whether or not you hit poor Thunder too hard. Sure, and when we step outside the door of this building, those hired killers of yours who are hidden behind buildings and trees

will fill me full of steel-jacketed rifle lead! That's the kind of stunt you'd think of—to stand to one side holding up that lantern so I make a good target while you're safe, yourself, on account of that big white hat. Sure—and you'd all slip out of town before the gun smoke settles. It'd look like I picked the lock of my cell, slugged Thunder and was killed in the act of escape by some modest party who knows how to keep a buttoned mouth.

But Tom's smooth face showed nothing at all beyond an understandable hesitation and suspicion. His searching eyes showed nothing but nervousness. "O. K.," he mumbled to the masked man in the white sombrero, "O. K.—lead the way. I gotta trust somebody."

BILL EUSTACE had not worked in vain in Crowhop since first parting with Tom. He had found that there were plenty of citizens in town who were distrustful of Shaw Benson's pyramiding political power. Following Tom's dramatic actions at the Pink Hog, Bill found others who were ready to suspect Benson himself of the murder of John Craft and no longer ready to be a party to any lynch efforts against Tom. And Bill, while keeping an eye on every move made by Benson's crowd, had quietly gathered together the most trustworthy of these citizens. He had warned them of what he and Tom expected to happen.

They were as ready now as they would ever be. They had not been misled by the actions of Benson's followers in another part of town who were apparently liquoring up to gain the courage for an attempt against the jail. Instead, Bill and his half dozen suspicious citizens were closely watching the jail. And they had not missed the furtive approach of three shadowy figures to the brick building. Apparently one had been a Mexican, and this one had boldly entered Thunder's lighted office.

Hidden at points of advantage, Bill Eustace whispered to his accomplices. "We got to keep a close eye on those hombres. You watch the ones outside, I'll keep my peepers peeled for the Mex. Chances are they're gonna try to break Tom out of jail. And when they get him out, they'll try to sneak him off to a quiet place to back-shoot him."

He did not tell them of the .45 he had tossed into Tom's cell. Hands on the butts of their six-guns, scarcely breathing, they watched in intent silence.

A shadowy figure came out first.

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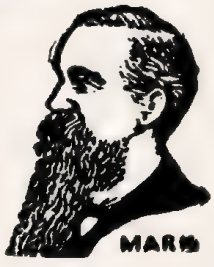

Close behind him was the white-hatted man, carrying a lantern he had appropriated from Thunder's office. There was no sign of Thunder.

Bill Eustace caught his breath and began to rise slowly from his hiding place. No telling when that Mex, whom he suspected of being Shaw Benson, might begin to trigger.

Suddenly there was a hoarse call of warning from one of the Benson men outside. He had jumped up and was holding an aimed rifle in his hands. There was an indistingiushable mingling of cries from the two men in the jail doorway and the white-hatted man jumped aside, dropping his lantern at the feet of the other.

Bill Eustace swore savagely and flipped his six-gun. Too late! The killers in the dark were already pouring rifle lead into the madly scrambling man nearest the lantern. It made no difference that Bill Eustace and a half dozen citizens were swarming down on them, crippling them with low-flung shots, trying to halt them with shouts of warning—Tom, Tom Robin, trying to escape, had grown suddenly rigid! His body was shuddering under the impact of lead it had received and was suddenly plunging crazily down the jailhouse steps.

The two killers outside slumped into formless heaps. Then Bill Eustace was sprinting savagely for the jail, and his china-blue eyes were blazing pits of grief and fury.

The white-hatted man had dodged back inside the jail office. With complete recklessness, Bill stormed up the steps and lunged for the door. His six-gun was swinging up. Then, as though struck, he suddenly halted—his mouth sagging open and his face grown blank, his gun hand limp. He had heard a voice—Tom's voice—and then he saw Tom's face warily thrusting itself into the light for him to see!

"Hold it, Bill—it's me—I'm all right, pard! Easy!"

In stunned silence they turned up the faces of the men at the jailhouse steps and the killers crumpled on the ground a few steps away—Shaw Benson and two of his pet gun fighters!

The big white hat was pushed to the back of Tom Robin's head. There was a tense grin on his young face as he eyed the little knot of townsmen who had become more numerous and noisy.

"I put Bill's gun in the middle of Shaw's back and made him change hats with me," Tom said quietly. "I had a hunch he was leading me out to something like this, and at the last second I had the smart idea that the white hat would mark the man not to shoot." He paused, staring unwaveringly into their wondering eyes. "Well—now who do you reckon's the killer in Crowhop?"

"Shaw Benson!" came the growled chorus.

"Right! Killer gun talk has told the truth!" Instantly he was in action again, running across the square with Bill Eustace at his heels. "C'mon," he flung over his shoulder. "The rest of Benson's crowd'll be leaving town as fast as they can grab for horses. And there's a few questions we need to ask them first!"

There was no need for him to explain that he had not even been in Crowhop on the night of John Craft's death—that he had been miles away at Bill Eustace's ranch, playing a friendly game of stud. There was almost no need for any other explanations than those three still figures lying there in the dark and the white hat that now lay beside them.

THE END.

Grizzly Borg had Limpy Pike right where he wanted him—between the clenched jaws of a deadly bear trap —but could he keep him there?

"I could shoot you," Borg gloated, "but I won't. I'll let you freeze to death."

GRIZZLY BAITED

by GUNNISON STEELE

THE snow had long since stopped, but the sky was low and sullen, and a wolflike wind swept with a wild trumpeting sound across the Idaho hills. Limpy Joe Pike, his wiry body braced against the hammering wind, his leathery face protected by an upflung arm, tried to peer among the

spruce and fir trees ahead.

Grizzly Borg, he knew, was close; and death was never far from Grizzly Borg. From the hoary Selkirks in Canada, to the Salmon River Mountains in the south, sinister tales were whispered of Borg. Grizzlylike in stature, seemingly insensible to cold and hardships, he was a creature of the night who roamed abroad when other men would freeze. Accused of black crimes in three States, Grizzly Borg had managed always to stay just beyond the reach of the law.

For two days and nights Limpy Joe had clung grimly on Borg's trail. It wasn't love of the law that had driven the runty oldster on and on until he had hardly enough strength to put one snowshoe before the other; rather, it was the wilderness code of an eye for an eye. Grizzly Borg had brutally tortured and murdered Yakima Logan, Limpy Joe's partner, and stolen their furs. Limpy Joe knew he could never rest until the killer was brought to justice.

The trail had led upward from the lowlands into the forested, snow-locked hills. Here, it was rumored, Grizzly Borg had a hide-out. Now, Limpy Joe knew, the trail was nearing its end, for they were deep in the wind-lashed hills.

Warily, Limpy Joe regarded the snow-weighted trees ahead. Borg had the strength of a grizzly, the cruelty and cunning of a timber wolf. He knew Limpy Joe was on his back trail. The trapper was handicapped by his limping gait; Borg had been slowed by the weight of the stolen furs. Neither had a rifle. Twice this day Limpy Joe had barely escaped death traps Borg had laid for him. Now, as the killer neared his hide-out, he would probably whirl and strike with the savagery of his kind.

LIMPY JOE racketed forward, eyes wary, hand on the butt of his old Peacemaker in the pocket of his sheepskin coat. Rock hills and boulders were on all sides. Borg's trail was plain ahead of him. Limpy Joe's eyes roved uneasily, probing the tree shadows.

And suddenly, at a spot where the trail dipped into a jack-pine thicket, he rocked abruptly back on his heels. A chill feeling touched him as he saw how narrowly he'd escaped a ghastly fate.

The deadfall had been built directly across his path. Two more steps and his skull or back would have been crushed by the heavy, boulder-weighted pine log. Fresh anger surging through him, Limpy Joe probed in the snow for the deadfall trigger—a taut *babiche* cord barely concealed below the surface—and threw the trap.

"The yellow, murderin' carcajou!" Limpy Joe muttered. "He don't deserve to live—and, by hell and beaver, he won't! Must have thought I was a greenhorn, though, to step into an old trap like that."

Spurred by new impatience, he started to circle the deadly contraption. Ten feet to the right there was an opening through the jack-pine thicket; to the left the way was barred by headhigh boulders. The trapper started through the opening.

Suddenly, a light seemed to flash in Limpy Joe's mind. Grizzly Borg had the carcajou's cunning as well as its cruelty. *He wouldn't expect an old woodsman like Limpy Joe Pike to walk into that deadfall.*

Again Limpy Joe rocked back on his heels. But he was too late. There was a wild flurry of snow at his feet, a snarling, snapping sound. Something grabbed at his right leg and flung him violently to the

ground. Stunned, he rolled over, looking dazedly down at the thing that was clamped about his leg just below the knee: A huge bear trap, a grizzly tamer, weighing at least forty pounds and with saw-toothed jaws that would spread a full yard!

Gray-faced, sick with the knowledge that Grizzly Borg had *meant* for him to evade the deadfall, Limpy Joe looked down at the monstrous thing that held him helpless.

TEN minutes later a flock of pine siskins nearby flew up with whirring wings. There was a crunching sound in the snow, and the head and shoulders of a man appeared over the granite boulder about twenty feet away. The man was huge, with dark, cruel, predatory features and staring little eyes. Here, Limpy Joe knew, was Grizzly Borg. The killer had a gun in his hand.

Borg grinned, revealing doglike teeth, as he regarded the trapped man. "So," he sneered. "The old wolf was too smart for the deadfall—but not smart enough for the bear trap, eh?"

Silent, hate and anger naked in his bleak eyes, Limpy Joe stared up at the killer.

"Nothin' to say, huh?" Borg chuckled. "And not long to live. I savvy you've got a gun in your fist, old man. But it won't help you any."

"You aim to take this hellish thing off my leg?" Limpy Joe demanded.

"No," Borg said flatly. "You're finished, old man. You oughta had more sense than to follow me into the hills."

"You burned Yakima's feet, then killed him—"

Grizzly Borg scowled. "The old goat was stubborn. He wouldn't tell me where the pelts were cached, so I had to lose time lookin' for 'em. You're stubborn, too. You had your chance to turn back."

"I swore I'd see you hang—or die with a bullet in you—and I will."

"You won't see anything, not long," Borg told him. "I could shoot you, but I won't. Sometime, maybe somebody'll find your bones. They'll say: 'Poor devil—he stumbled into his own bear trap, and starved or froze to death!' Or maybe, after you've been here awhile, you'll want to use that gun you've got."

"You murderin' snake!" Limpy Joe said harshly. "You can't do that!"

"Can't I?" Grizzly Borg mimicked. "That's what that gent you call Yakima said. Now it won't be long till maybe you two peppery ol' badgers can talk things over."

"Borg, you better kill me now. Somehow, I'll get loose from this devilish thing and—"

Grizzly Borg grinned again, looking at the serrated jaws that dug cruelly into Limpy Joe's leg. "That trap was made to hold the biggest bear that ever lived. You *might* shoot yourself loose; but even then your leg'd be chewed half off. You'd starve, or freeze to death out here in the hills. That'll give you somethin' to think about."

"You dirty carcajou!" Limpy Joe growled and his hand came from out of his coat pocket.

Laughing, the killer ducked from view, and the trapper's bullet caromed screamingly from the boulder at exactly the spot where Borg had stood. Grizzly moved back from the boulder, chuckling, and strode away with catlike speed and grace.

He crossed a ravine and went along the crest of a bare ridge, not seeming to notice the hammering

wind. Strapped to his powerful shoulders was a compact pack that held the stolen furs. He'd chosen only the best—marten, otter, glossy foxes. He went swiftly through the silent, shadowy forest, and soon came to a one-room log cabin that huddled back under towering cliffs.

Dumping the pack on the floor, Borg went quickly about kindling a fire in the old stove and preparing a hasty meal. Occasionally he grinned, but the grimace served only to heighten the wolfishness of his saturnine face. He was highly satisfied with his foray into the lowlands. Besides the pelts, he had sated his craving for inflicting suffering on others.

Tomorrow, he'd return to the bear trap. He'd taunt the helpless oldster—if Limpy Joe was still alive.

IT was while Borg was gulping the half-cooked food that the door crashed abruptly open. The killer bounded to his feet, whirling in mid-air like a cat. Then he froze, stark amazement making his eyes bulge.

Limpy Joe Pike stood in the door opening, planted solidly, the long-barreled old Peacemaker in his hand.

"Now it's my deal, Borg," he said flatly. "Up with your hands!"

"How'd— I thought—" Borg stammered.

"Ne'mind that. Reach up—quick!"

Borg's gun lay, along with his snowshoes, on a bunk across the room. Snarling a curse, the big killer leaped suddenly toward the bunk. Limpy Joe's gun roared, and Borg crashed to the floor as if his legs had been chopped from under him. He rolled over, pawing at his wounded leg.

"Next one'll find your black heart, Borg," Limpy Joe said grimly. "Only reason that one didn't, I wanted to see you hang." He stepped quickly forward and took the gun from the bunk.

Grizzly Borg cursed awhile, then finally quieted. He seemed dazed. "What I can't savvy is, how'd you get out o' that bear trap and follow me here? Your leg—it ain't—"

With the gun barrel Limpy Joe tapped his right leg below the knee, and it gave back a hollow, wooden sound.

"Had a little trouble gettin' my peg off, the shape I was in. But then all I had to do was pry the trap jaws apart with my gun barrel and pull it out. It was chewed up a bit, but good as new." Limpy Joe chuckled. "One thing about a bear trap. Once a gent sticks a leg in one, he don't have to worry about that same leg bein' caught ag'in!"

THE END.

★ ★

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SADDLE WARMER

by S. OMAR BARKER

They asked me, "What's a cowboy?" an' it made me scratch my head;
But after cogitatin' some, this here is what I said:
"When saddle leather's frozen with the frost of winter's storm,
A cowboy is the feller that has got to git it warm.
A pitchin' bronco spills the pack, a man's nose sheds some skin—
A cowboy is the feller that climbs on to ride ag'in.

"There's heaps of men bowlegged, but if you'll notice it,
The saddle bend of cowboy legs begins plumb at the split.
A spinnin' rope looks fancy in a cowboy vaudeville sketch,
But it takes a hossback buckaroo to throw a loop an' *ketch!*
A big hat on your noggin ain't no proof you'll make a hand
Unless the eyes it's shadin' savvy how to read a brand.

"You take book education—ever'body's got it now—
But a man, to make a cowboy, must be smarter than the cow.
Jest a hired man on hossback—so some dude smart-Aleck wrote,
To describe this Western hairpin. Yet I'll kindly have you note
That death an' danger ain't such things as hired men face for pay,
But the breed of men that's cowboys—well, they face 'em anyway!"

RODEO PAYOFF

by ANSON HARD

Tolled into a nest of renegade guns, Mel Gibson knew he was staring boothill in the face unless he could make a desperate last chance pay hundred-to-one odds.

THERE was excitement among the men about the starting pens, a low-pitched murmuring different from the ordinary carefree conversation. The fighting of a wall-eyed bronc, racking against the bars as the cinchers leathered him, passed unnoticed in the confusion. Even the spectators in the grandstand were beginning to rise and peer toward the starting gates.

The two men facing each other in the center of the hubbub were the exact opposites in manner and appearance. Mel Gibson, owner of the Rafter B Ranch, was not tall, and his pale, sun-bleached hair was almost white against his brown Stetson. The gaunt, dark man facing him had the skin texture and cheekbones of a Mexican Indian, and his words snapped with the sibilance of a whiplash.

"I object to thees man as a judge. He is not fit to judge my riding!"

Gibson felt a flush gather behind his ears. He was not afraid, but he had not come to the rodeo seeking trouble. He knew this man well enough—Miguel Sanchez, a border drifter. His lips parted for a hot retort, but before words came, Hank Carson, chairman of the rodeo committee, came shouldering toward him.

"What's goin' on here, men?"

A freckled puncher beside Mel spoke, his lips losing their customary grin. His silk bandanna was knotted through a scarf ring of curious carving. "Major Keeler got kicked by that bronc I was ridin'. He was 'lowin' Mel could act as judge in his place."

An elderly man, supported on either side by chapped riders, nodded. One leg hung useless and pain racked his face.

Carson's eyes came back again to Gibson. "That's all right with the committee. You ought to be a good judge, Mel. You're the best rider in the county."

"The best rider—*diablos!*" grunted Miguel. "It is the lie!"

"You shut up!" ordered the freckled rider.

"Never mind him, Johnny." Mel stopped the argument.

Carson's eyes darted back and forth, but he overlooked the interruption. "How come you're not entered in the riding yourself, Mel?"

Gibson tugged at his hat brim, lowering it. "I got delayed. Didn't get here till after the entries were closed. Some jaspers laid down my south fence last night and I had to put it up."

"Hm-m-m," mused Carson. "Tough luck, but if you can judge in Keeler's place we'd be obliged."

The roaring crowd liked Miguel's ride, and Mel knew there would be bad trouble when he disqualified the border drifter.

"I protest," snapped Sanchez again. "He is not the fit man to judge."

Mel jerked his hat brim a degree lower. "Listen, Sanchez, sayin' I can't judge is one thing, but sayin' I ain't fit to judge is another. Watch your words."

Miguel's brow lowered like a thundercloud. "I knew I would not get the fair deal because I am great *caballero* and can win. I am to be robbed of my victory already."

"Go on in and ride," said Mel dryly.

Sanchez was determined to have the last word. "If you so much as pull the one little trick on me, you shall answer." He stamped away.

Staring after the Mexican, Johnny Fisher tugged at Gibson's sleeve. "Look out for that hombre," he cautioned. "He acts as if he were Pancho Villa's little brother. He's

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got a scheme of some sort on, an' you're the goat."

MEL waved his friend away. He was in no mood for joking as he swung into leather and guided his pony into the arena. Jim Lykins and Bart McNaughton, the other judges, swung around to join him beyond the chute gates.

The three men nodded to one another. Their attention was attracted to the horse being saddled in the pen. A marble-eyed bronc, head down, was twisting and pawing behind the gate. Mel saw the cinchers step down, and a moment later Miguel Sanchez scrambled up the side bars and eased himself into the saddle.

The bronc was out of the pen in a flash of speed, unbuckling itself as it came. There were no preliminary crowhops. It was fight from the word "go." Horse and rider went by the judges like a brown and gray tornado.

There was no doubt Miguel Sanchez could ride. He reefed the fighting outlaw like a top twister. His spurs raked deep, urging the animal to its limit. He was out for first money, and the more he could make the horse unwind itself, the better were his chances for impressing judges and crowd. Cheers began to roll down from the grandstand; spectators surged to their feet, hats waving.

Mel, trailing closely along, saw things beyond the vision of the crowd. He noticed that Miguel permitted too much light to show between himself and the saddle, that he was ramming the bronc deeply behind the cinches rather than scratching him with the spurs. He shot a glance at Lykins and McNaughton, but could read nothing from their faces.

Then, a half second before the timer's whistle blew, he saw Miguel grab and hang to the saddlehorn!

It was a quick, almost unseen, movement. The bronc had reversed itself in the air like a cat, and Sanchez, almost unseated, had saved himself for one split second by pulling leather. The hazers moved in and the rider slipped to safety. The applause from the stands was a deafening roar.

Lykins motioned Mel to come nearer, and the three judges walked their horses back to the starting chutes.

"I don't cotton to that hombre's style," mused Lykins, "but we got to give him credit for stickin'."

"If I was placin' money," McNaughton declared, "I'd give odds on him bestin' Johnny Fisher in the finals tomorrow."

"I don't know." Lykins was still in doubt. "He didn't stay down in the saddle quite enough to suit me. What do you think, Mel?"

Gibson at that moment cursed his position as judge, but he made his decision without wasting time. "Since you're askin' me, I'll tell you. We got rodeo rules, and our business is to enforce them. Sanchez was hangin' to the horn when the whistle blew."

The other two jerked to a stop in surprise. "I told you I didn't cotton to him," repeated Lykins. "That disqualifies him completely."

McNaughton looked disappointed. "If Mel saw him do it, they ain't nothin' more to say. I shore hate to see him ruled out, though."

Mel watched Lykins spur over to Hank Carson, who was standing beside the announcer, and pass the information on. Then his gaze swung back to Miguel, who was swaggering toward the gate. There was a smug look of satisfaction and conceit on the swarthy countenance. Miguel was plainly waiting for the words of praise from the announcer. A moment later the magnified voice rolled over the arena:

"Sanchez disqualified by judges. A great ride, but he grabbed the horn too soon. Better luck next time, Miguel."

SANCHEZ stood like a man petrified. His face registered amazement. Then he whirled, his hot gaze searching for Mel.

"So you had to play me the dirty, an' lie that I grab the saddlehorn!" He dropped into border dialect, insulting in his expressions.

"Careful," cautioned Mel.

But Sanchez was not to be stopped. His fury fed upon words. "You say I grab the saddlehorn, I, Miguel José Bartolomeo Sanchez y Alvarado?"

"I did." Mel eased from leather and faced his accuser.

"Then," hissed Miguel, "you are the damned liar!"

Mel's fist whipped out before caution could stop him. He caught Miguel on the side of the mouth, and the Mexican, his lips cut and bleeding, was swept backward by the force of the blow. He staggered for a moment against the arena bars. Mel half turned away, irked at having been drawn into a fight.

Then from the corral bars behind him he heard the screeching quaver of an owl! Johnny Fisher's signal of warning. Mel whirled to see Miguel's hand snaking out of his jacket bearing a snub-nosed derringer!

Mel went out of his tracks like a leaping animal. His weight struck Sanchez before the other could straighten his weapon arm. Mel bore him down with a smashing right, and fell upon the gun arm, twisting it. The hand gun slipped to the ground.

"Hey, you hombres, stop that!"

Hank Carson crowded between the two. "No fighting on the rodeo grounds."

Sanchez got to his feet, his face livid. "You shall answer to me for the insult, *canastos, si!*"

Garse Whipple, the deputy sheriff, came running up and Carson indicated the Mexican. "Get this man off the grounds," he ordered tersely, "and until he can behave himself, keep him off."

Mel picked up the derringer. "Better take your hide-out gun along, Sanchez."

Miguel spoke slowly, but there was menace in his words. "When I want it, I shall take it." He shrugged away from Whipple's grasp and disappeared behind the grandstand.

The incident passed quickly and was forgotten by the spectators. Mel turned away, dropping the deadly little gun into his shirt pocket. The bronc riding was now finished for the day and he was no longer needed. Getting his horse, he rode slowly from town.

Mel let the pony pick its way, his thoughts absorbing him. He was not a trouble hunter, but circumstances were pressing him. Small thefts about his ranch, deviltries like the broken fence, were becoming too numerous. Someone was deliberately roiling him.

There had been plenty of trouble in his father's time. The Gibson-Zamorra feud had been a bloody one. Mel had been only a tow-headed button then. Was the same kind of a thing repeating itself? Was Sanchez stirring trouble even as Zamorra had plagued Mel's father? It looked that way. Then there had been his father's death two years ago, from a stumbling horse in a dark canyon. All this had had its effect upon Mel, sobering him, causing him to brood.

SUDDENLY Mel looked up to find himself at the lower end of the Cinchita range, looking southward toward the deserted adobes of an abandoned ranch. The Casa Grande! The clear air foreshortened distance. The buildings were almost two miles away, and the international boundary line ran on this side of them. Mel sat gazing idly, his mind scarcely concentrated on the abandoned ranch, when a horseman suddenly appeared beside the tumbling stable, was visible for a moment, and then disappeared around the compound wall. The lank, easy-sitting posture snapped one word into Gibson's mind—Sanchez!

Mel's first impulse was to shove his pony forward and see what the Mexican was doing, but common sense checked him. Nothing was to be gained by seeking trouble with Sanchez. Mel had no certainty it was the Mexican, anyway. He turned his pony back toward town.

That night was a gala time in Nogache City. Mel moved along the street, but he could not join wholeheartedly in the fun. A feeling of depression kept him aloof from the revelry.

A hand touched him on the shoulder. He started, and then inwardly cursed his nervousness. Turning, he looked into the grinning face of Johnny Fisher.

"Touch my skin, you ring-tailed gopher," greeted Johnny. "What happened to you this afternoon?"

Mel gave him a brief answer. He would give his arm any time if Johnny needed it, but at the moment he could not join in the other's irresponsible mood. He drew the kid back to seriousness for a moment.

"You're winnin' the finals tomorrow, kid. You heard me."

Johnny made a strained grimace.

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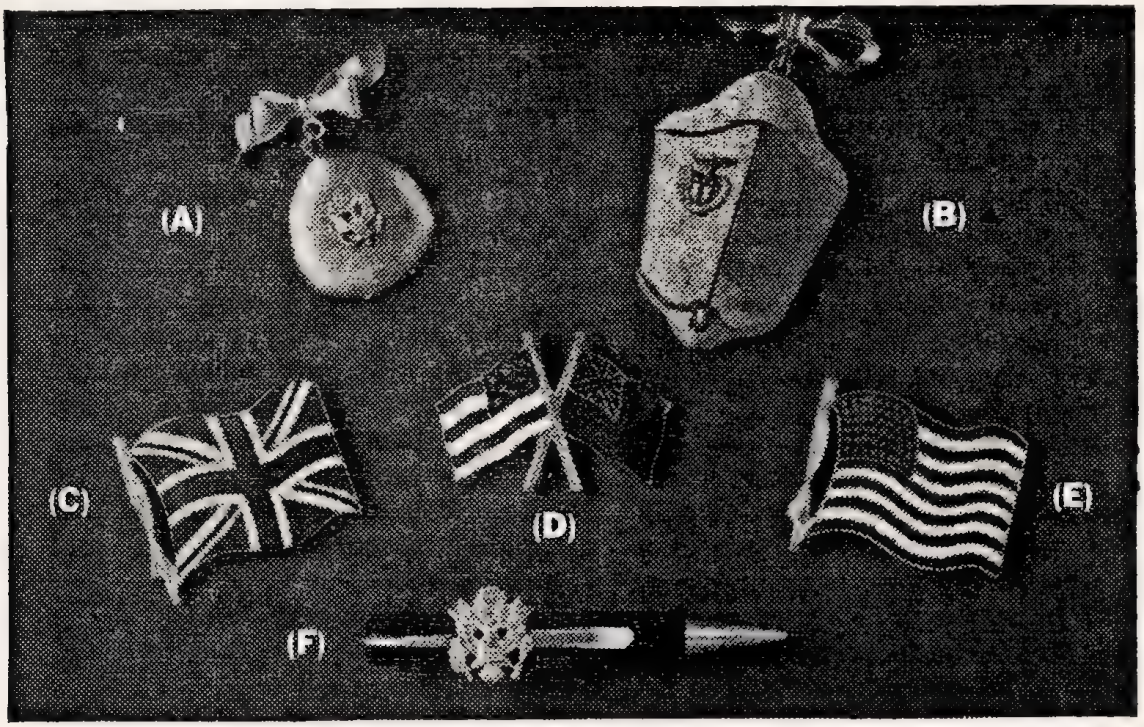

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Continued from page 80

"Nobody can say I won't try."

Mel noticed a sharp-featured man lurking behind Fisher, intently watching the two with ferret eyes. He had an impulse to ask the fellow what he wanted, but Johnny suddenly turned toward the stranger.

"Mel, meet up with Shoke Tupper from over Deming way. He's a fancy roper himself."

Gibson shook hands with the stranger, but felt a definite aversion for the man. Tupper was constantly on the alert with the wariness of a fox. His jetty eyes were shifty.

The presence of Tupper cast a dampness on the meeting of the two friends. Mel excused himself from trailing to the bright lights and soon Johnny and his new acquaintance drifted on down the boardwalk.

AFTER spending half an hour with the injured Major Keeler at the hotel, Mel decided to drift toward the dance at the Cowman's Hall. But he was not destined to join in a quadrille that night. A man came hurrying after him and plucked at his sleeve. He turned to face the shifty gaze of Tupper.

"Can I talk with you?" Tupper said in a low voice. "I gotta tell you somethin' about Johnny Fisher."

"Fisher? What's he up to?"

"You're a good friend of Fisher's, ain't you?" Tupper asked.

"I am."

"All right, then. I'm tellin' you he's headed for trouble. They's a bunch of fellows goin' to beat him up."

"What?"

"Yeah. They're goin' to fix him so he can't ride tomorrow."

"How do you know all that?" Mel demanded. "Where is Johnny now?"

"That's just the point. I don't know. He was down at Gringo Pete's saloon. That's where we heard 'em talkin'."

Mel stiffened. Gringo Pete's was the lowest dive in town.

"All right, Tupper, tell me what you know. Talk fast."

"As I make out," Tupper said, "them hombres is gamblin' on the finals tomorrer. They was aimin' to stake their rolls on Sanchez, but he got disqualified. Now they speak of backin' Denver Peters, but they ain't sure he can outride Johnny Fisher. Peters made the finals this afternoon along with Fisher and Charlie Cliff."

"I see. What was Johnny doing around Gringo Pete's, and how did you overhear this?"

"He went with me," Tupper explained glibly. "I had a bet with the barkeep an' we went to collect it. I stopped by the window to roll a smoke, an' we heard 'em talkin' inside. They was plannin' to put Johnny out o' the finals."

"Who was?"

"I can't swear to it, but I think it was the feller who braced you this afternoon."

"Sanchez! Go on."

"When Johnny heard them, he got mad an' said: 'No border-driftin' Mex can run a sandy on me. If he wants to start somethin', now's the time to begin it.' I tried to talk him out of goin' in, but it was no go. I knew there'd be real trouble, so I ran over to the hotel an' got my gun. When I got back there was no Johnny, no Sanchez, nor none of them in at Gringo Pete's. That looked mighty queer, so I come for you."

"You did right." Doubts bobbed into Gibson's mind, but with Johnny's safety at stake, he couldn't hesitate. "Any idea where they might be?"

"No, I ain't—only this: One of

the fellers mentioned Casa Grande when we first heard 'em talkin', but I didn't know whether it was a real place er not."

Casa Grande! The deserted ranch across the line. Mel recalled how he had seen Miguel lurking around the place that afternoon.

Turning, Mel ran toward the livery stable where he had left the pony and checked his gun.

Spectators stared after Gibson as he raced from town. He heard the drum of another horse and guessed that Tupper was following.

THE lights of the town dropped behind Mel as the trail cut through Briar Canyon and leveled out on the bench that spread southward. The starlight made a world of opaque shadows. There was no moon, and the earth was a splotched area of brush and sand. He left the trailing horseman behind as he shoved his pony to its fastest gait.

The level area broke into slight ridges and gullies. Gibson breasted the last rise and saw the deserted buildings of the Casa Grande.

Even in his rush, Mel did not forget caution. He slowed his horse and drew into the edge of a pear thicket lest his silhouette betray him. The old buildings seemed to be untenanted, yet a dozen men might be there in hiding.

An eerie spell engulfed the old spread. The flat-topped adobes lay like smudges in the thin light. The hush was like men holding their breaths. Expectancy was in the atmosphere. Mel slipped from leather and listened for the sound of a horseman following. Nothing came but a whisper of the wind in the black chaparral.

Leaving his horse, Mel crept along the ridge until a slanting box gave him a concealed path toward the ranch. Five minutes later he was at the edge of the outer buildings. The silence remained unbroken. There were almost no night noises. At first he feared Tupper might make noise following, but either the man was following with the stealth of an Indian or he had turned back.

Mel kept in the shadow of the old stable, his shoulder following the line of crumbling walls. The remains of the old compound gave him the security of shadow until he reached the main building, but even then he did not venture through the rear door. He remained several minutes crouching at the wall corner, absorbing rather than listening to sounds; a feeling swept over him that men were present, a concrete prescience of danger, yet not one sound verified his suspicions. Doubts stormed his mind. Was the whole story a fabrication, a ruse to get him out of town? Tupper's failure to follow closely gave credence to this possibility. Had he been a fool?—Mel asked himself. Then it was that his fingers, feeling along the sandy ground, touched something that for a moment checked thought. Even in the darkness he knew the object to be a scarf ring, curiously carved, a ring that could belong to no one but Johnny Fisher.

Johnny had been here; he must be here now. Almost like a dog at scent, Mel became alert, nerves strained. He began to creep forward, feeling his way step by step. He crept under the rear portal with its sagging beams and on into the main rooms of the old house.

The paneless windows were rectangles of gray. He eased forward, keeping beneath these planes of light. He came at last into the old *sala* with its great windows opening southward

Continued on page 85

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toward the plains and deserts of Mexico.

A rat scurried across the floor and was gone with a rustle of sound. The ensuing silence was a pressure upon the eardrums. Mel began to curse his caution. If Sanchez and his gang were here, why not confront them boldly? He took two steps toward the broad southern window and looked out.

THE purple horizon with the stars low was like a spangled back drop to the splotched grayness of the earth. Shadows ran across the land though no clouds were in the sky.

"Hold it, my frien'! No move!"

The words were low in volume, yet the syllables hissed deadly as the warning of a rattler. Mel stiffened automatically, became motionless. He was no physical coward, yet the possibility of a gun leveled between his shoulder blades with but a twitch on a hair trigger to send leaden death, was not matter to be rash about. His hands in the air, he turned slowly. Miguel Sanchez's voice went on:

"Do not move. I told you we should meet again, my frien'."

Mel could see two men, the lean, belligerent figure of Sanchez and, beside him, a heavier figure he did not recognize. The Mexican's weapon was leveled on Mel's midriff.

"Take his gun, Pedro," Sanchez ordered.

The heavier man padded forward with catlike steps, lifting the Colt from Mel's holster. A mirthless chuckle came from Miguel. The very insolence of the sound drove Mel to speech.

"All right, Sanchez, you got the drop. What about it?"

"You will soon learn. One does not play tricks with me. This is the last time we shall meet, my frien'."

"Big talk. You're not so bold when it's an even break."

Sanchez's voice became lower, more vicious. "Was it an even break when you disqualify me? Was it an even break when I, the best rider in Arizona, must lose face an' creep away? But you will not be judge tomorrow."

"Never mind me. Where's Johnny Fisher?"

"He shall not ride tomorrow either and—"

There was a moment of silence, pregnant with possibilities. Sanchez seemed to wait, holding his words to torture his listener. "He is where you will soon be—in hell, my frien'!"

"That's a lie! You haven't the nerve."

There was a soft call from outside. A match scratched and a glow filled an adjoining room. Mel heard the snap of a lantern chimney being raised and lowered. A man with the light stepped into the *sala*. It was Shoke Tupper.

Mel's half-opened lips closed into a tight line. He had been tricked from the beginning. Tupper was hand and glove with Sanchez. Would they dare a double murder?

From somewhere above came the quavering, unholy screech of an owl!

THE sound was like a tocsin drumming at the nerves of Mel. Johnny Fisher! The old night call. Johnny was somewhere here and alive!

Mel's mind drummed with possibilities. He must take a chance. Johnny might be tied and helpless. If the two of them could only get together, they stood a chance against Miguel's gang.

The sound of the owl call was not true enough to fool Sanchez and his partners. Questioning glances shot between them. Tupper's lips pursed.

"That ain't no owl!" he snapped.

The diversion was enough for Mel. His legs doubled like a spring and straightened as he hurled himself backward out of the window. A great fist seemed to strike him in midair, ramming his chest. Then everything was blinding flash and roar, covering all other sensations. His shoulders struck the sandy earth, and for seconds all was hazy above him.

Breath came back to his lungs with a gulp. His chest was numbed, pained. Yet he could think, move. He had the presence of mind to creep close under the casement of the window.

He heard guttural curses from the *sala*. Sanchez barked orders to his companions. Tupper and the squat man ran out the back door to circle the building. Mel heard Sanchez stride toward the window. The Mexican held a gun out over the sill.

Mel's hand darted up, and his fingers closed upon the wrist. He tugged downward with his full weight. Sanchez was taken by surprise, and he was jerked in a somersault out the window, the six-gun thundering again and lifting a geyser of sand.

Mel twisted on Miguel's arm, bringing a scream of pain from the Mexican. The gun fell to the sand out of Mel's sight. The two men scrambled to their feet. The Mexican's infuriated cursing was in Mel's ears. He stepped back, spotting the lean point of Sanchez's jaw and driving at it. The dark man tottered back against the house wall, his eyes momentarily glazed.

"Hist, Mel, up this way! They're circling."

A rope snaked down from above, uncoiling. Without question, Mel seized it and pulled upward, digging his toes into the crumbling bricks. It took but seconds to scale the twelve-foot wall and drop over the parapet. Johnny Fisher was crouched there.

"You all right, kid?" Mel demanded.

"Yeah. The polecats had me tied here on the roof. It took time to get my fingers into the knot, but I made it. That blasted Shoke—"

"Save your breath. Got a gun?"

"No."

"Then we're still in a jackpot. They'll be coming up."

Even as he spoke, men called from below. Miguel snarled curses. "Up, up, you fools, get them!" he ordered. "They have no guns. There's a ladder by the back *azotea*—"

Feet padded on the sand. Johnny half rose, his body scraping against the parapet. As long as they kept below the parapet there was no danger from below, but as soon as Tupper or the squat man gained the ladder top—

Mel began to scurry across the roof, making for the rear portico. "Come on," he called to Johnny. "We've got to keep 'em down."

Hands were already over the top. A man launched himself into view. Mel, already crouched, plunged at his legs in a flying tackle. The two went down in a welter of motion. A gun barrel glanced from Mel's scalp, and then his fist found a mark in the stomach of his opponent. Breath went out of the burly man, leaving him a spineless sack. Mel followed with an uppercut that tumbled him backward, and he went over the parapet still clinging to his unfired weapon.

There was the tug and thump of men struggling at the ladder head. "I can handle Tupper," Johnny yelled. "Look out ahead!"

Mel whirled to see Sanchez standing at the far side of the flat roof!

The Mexican was not ten paces away. He must have come up the rope while Mel was struggling with the squat man.

Mel's eyes grew keen, owllike in the starlight. The Mexican's figure stood out clearly on the opposite side of the roof. Hatless, his unshaded face was a picture of cruelty. His eyes were sunken, unblinking, depthless as the orbs of a killer. His lips were drawn back, and the deep lines around his mouth were like furrows in stone. His teeth glinted as his gun came steadily upward.

SANCHEZ did not hurry. There was no need for haste. He knew that he faced an unarmed man. The old instincts of torture raged in him, and his accumulated fury drove him on. His gun lifted, leveled.

"The revenge at last. Long ago I swear it against the Geebsons. First the father; then the son. *Now!*"

A twinge in Mel's chest racked his ribs. He knew he had not been shot, for there was no blood. That first shot of Miguel's as Gibson had hurtled himself backward through the window—had it been a miss? Still, the numbing pain over his heart was like the crush of a hammer blow. Why?

The derringer! Mel had forgotten it. The small hand gun in his shirt pocket had deflected the first slug. Had the slug in turn wrecked the mechanism of the derringer?

"First the father; then—" What did Miguel mean?

Mel pawed for his shirt pocket. Would the small gun work? The chances were all against him. The pain in his chest drove through him like a knife. Each moment he expected to be blinded by flame. Then the derringer nestled in his palm. He saw the long, gaunt figure of Miguel as he pressed the trigger.

The detonation was like a powder stick exploding in his hand. The roof was wrapped in volleys of sound. Red-hot wires seemed to rake Mel's left arm. He heard Johnny Fisher call, but the voice was thin and far away. He saw Sanchez spin halfway and fall across the parapet, plunging backward.

Mel walked toward the spot. Brain and body were both numb now. He saw Sanchez crumpled upon the ground.

For a moment Mel felt sick as his eyes clung to the gruesome spectacle. Then he was aware that Johnny Fisher was at his side.

"Jumpin' Jupiter!" muttered Johnny. "What a way to die! That hombre's name was Zamorra, not Sanchez. He's the son of that old bandit your dad run out of the country years ago."

"Zamorra! How do you know?"

"I heard a lot while I was tied on the roof. Zamorra was sworn to wipe out your family. He is the one that's been devilin' you, an' from what I heard, he rope-tripped your dad in the canyon. I can understand that in a Mex, but a renegade like Tupper—"

"Where is Tupper?" Mel cut in.

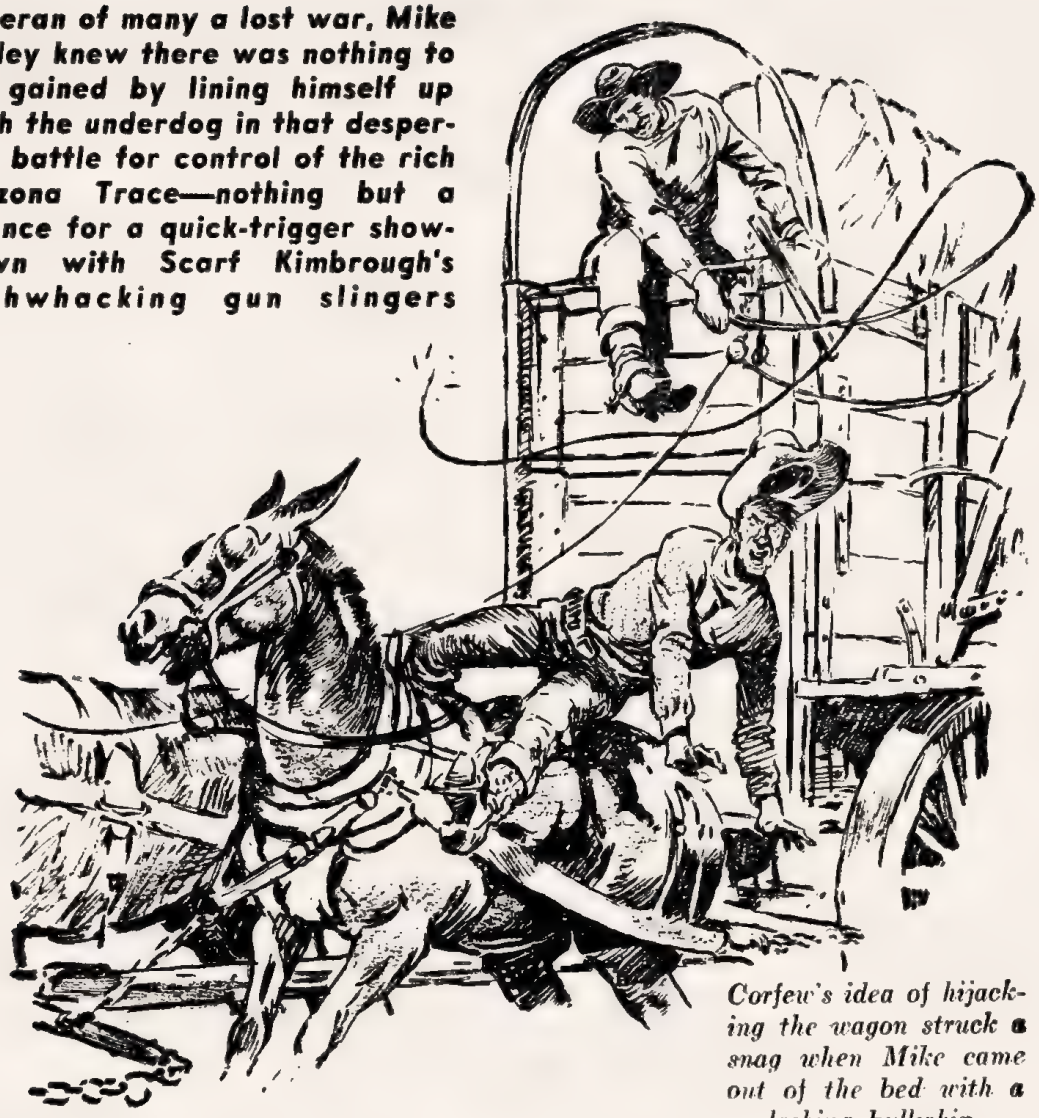
"He got away from me over the wall. Him an' that stubby cuss are hightailin' it south. They won't be seen in Nogache for a long time. Yeah, an' if I'm goin' to ride tomorrow, I better be gettin' back to Nogache myself."

Mel's thoughts began to clarify. Sanchez's—Zamorra's—attempt at vengeance had come out of the past and was gone. Mel felt a lightness in his spirits he had not felt in years.

"Ridin' tomorrow?" he echoed. "You mean winnin'. Come on, let's go, champ!"

THE END.

Veteran of many a lost war, Mike Valley knew there was nothing to be gained by lining himself up with the underdog in that desperate battle for control of the rich Arizona Trace—nothing but a chance for a quick-trigger showdown with Scarf Kimbrough's bushwhacking gun slingers



Corfew's idea of hijacking the wagon struck a snag when Mike came out of the bed with a lashing bullwhip.

FREIGHTERS OF HELL'S HIGHWAY

by M. HOWARD LANE

CHAPTER I

DEATH WAGON

It was May, and the sands of Salton Sink blazed like an inferno. Frozen white waves, scalloped by wind, the dunes marched ever forward with the deep-rutted wagon tracks of the Arizona Trace curving over them.

Riding the Trace, Mike Valley stared off across the dunes, and wondered if the water in his canteen would last him and his horse until

they could reach the high notch of San Gorgonio Pass in the gray-blue, iron mountains rimming the Sink to the west.

Then his eyes, that were the same pale-gray as the sky arching above the distant Pass, saw something which drove the squint from them. Apparently arriving from nowhere were a pair of buzzards. On planed wings they coasted above a point beyond the next dune. The only sign of life in all this vast expanse of shimmering sand and salt flats, they were, Mike knew, the harbingers of death. He touched his tall bay's flanks with the rusty spurs that decked the heels of his boots, curious as to what those vultures were scouting.

Fifty miles behind Mike Valley lay Colorado Crossing, and not far from there was Yuma. In the Arizona town, he'd read a printed announcement tacked to the notice board in the town square.

It had been a simple proposition until a man stopped to consider it closely.

WANTED, MEN

The Fireball Express Line, engaged in general freighting between San Bernardino, California, and Prescott, Arizona, will pay fifty dollars ($50.00) and found to able-bodied, jerk-line teamsters who measure up to the following qualifications:

1—Can you handle half-broke broncs and Missouri mules?

2—Are you afraid of Piutes, renegades and hell raisers in general, or will you stand your hand in time of trouble?

Mike had read the notice, and then his fingers had started involuntarily to the single cart-wheel dollar in his ragged corduroys.

Another loiterer, standing near, had noted that instinctive gesture. "Stranger," he had drawled, "that thar offer ain't quite so good as she sounds. You ever stop to wonder why the Fireball has to send clear to Arizony for men when they's a couple thousand livin' right in San Berdoo?"

One of Mike Valley's thick, dark eyebrows had lifted ironically. "Friend," he had murmured, "a man's got to eat. I'm on my way to Californy!"

He had neglected to add that Arizona wasn't the healthiest place for him right then. There'd been a little matter of fighting on the wrong side of a range war, and there were a couple of Arizona sheriffs looking for him at the moment.

It was a pattern old in Mike Valley's thirty years of life. Some unlucky star guiding his destiny always managed to put him on the side of the underdog. And nobody knew better than Mike Valley that the underdog seldom won wars.

The bay reached the crest of the sand ridge ahead. At the sight of what lay beyond, Mike gave the reins a sharp jerk and his loose, long frame stiffened in the saddle.

IT wasn't hard to see what the carrion birds were watching with such patient interest. Halfway across the wide salt flat ahead stood a weathered, canopied freight wagon. Ten big Missouri mules were hitched to it. The mouse-colored animals were standing with drooped heads, their legs braced. They were badly in need of water. That knowledge came to Mike Valley as he urged the bay forward again.

Riding closer, he could see that the saddle on the back of the nigh wheeler was empty. The jerk-line reins angled down to the crumpled driver who lay moveless in the black square of shade cast by the covered top of the wagon.

Wide, tough-looking lips tightening, Mike noticed that the big water

barrels strapped to the side boards of the wagon were sweating, which meant they were full of water. So thirst hadn't cost the mule skinner his seat.

Perhaps it was a sunstroke that had knocked the jerk liner from the nigh wheeler.

Then Mike saw that no sunstroke had felled the wagoner, for the back of the man's thin blue shirt was dark with dried blood. Blood from the round hole a bullet had punched between his shoulders.

Slowly Mike's eyes roved up to the weathered side boards of the freighter. Neatly stenciled there in black paint was the legend:

FIREBALL EXPRESS LINE
Tom Donegal, Prop.

Mike's eyes turned from that legend toward the far-off notch of San Gorgonio Pass. Speculatively, he rubbed the cherry-wood butt of the navy Colt riding his thigh.

"Mebbe," he told the dead man solemnly, "that gent in Yuma knew what he was talking about. If this is what happens to Donegal drivers, no wonder the San Berdoo supply is runnin' out!"

Mike tethered the bay to the tail gate of the wagon. The mule team was pointed toward San Gorgonio Pass, which meant they were heading home from Prescott with a wagon empty of freight. So robbery hadn't been the motive for the driver's murder.

While he was still trying to puzzle out a reason for the skinner's death, Mike took care of the living. He lugged water to the mules, and his straight lips thinned as he watched the animals dip their muzzles into the water bucket with pathetic eagerness. Mike Valley had his opinion of men who would leave a good team to die of thirst.

He had an even poorer opinion of men who would shoot fellow men in the back. The bearded oldster, who looked up from sightless eyes when Mike went to lift him from the sands didn't seem like the type to deserve this end.

Mike placed the dead man in the empty wagon, and felt once again the familiar desire to take a hand in this fight. The feeling was strengthened by the sight of the blood that had rubbed from the jerk liner's shirt onto his fingers.

It was a sight that turned Mike's eyes frosty as he looked at the dead man. "Guess this kind o' makes us pards of the Trace, old-timer," he said slowly. "Blood pards until we pay off the whelp who back-shot you."

Somehow, saying that made Mike feel better. He was whistling when he swung aboard the nigh wheeler's saddle.

COOLNESS came with the sinking of the sun behind the high, saw-toothed San Jacintos to the west. Mike felt the pace of the mules pick up without urging, and then as they drew the freight wagon to the top of another sand ridge, he discovered the reason.

A couple of miles ahead lay the first sign of habitation Mike had seen since leaving Yuma. Squatting in the center of a wide salt sink was a way station, built from varicolored desert rock and roofed with brush. Corrals and outbuildings lay a hundred feet across the yard from the house. On the other side green date palms and feathery tamarisk told of a spring.

"Get along, you desert canaries!" Mike yelled. "No dry camp for us!"

The thought came to him that the agent of the station ahead might be able to give him more details of the

trouble faced by the Fireball Express.

At a trot, the mules curved into the oasis yard. No one came from the station to welcome them, but Mike noticed that there were five hipshot mounts tethered at a shady rail out by the spring. Perhaps the Trace agent was busy serving the quintet who had ridden to this lonely station.

Deciding that, Mike swung the jerk-line team toward the corral. Right now his own body was demanding rest, food and water to make up for the quarts of perspiration that had poured from his skin during the day, and yet even stronger came a sudden feeling that a wise man would keep the mules going right through the station yard. Irritably, he shook the impression from his mind.

Behind him, as he unhitched the mules two by two and let them drink sparingly from the watering trough beside the corral, Mike heard the screech of dry hinges. Peering sideward from beneath the masking brim of his hat, he saw that the heavy plank door of the way station had opened. A squat, pudgy man in sloppy white clothes stood in the opening.

Mike lifted his head, a word of greeting on his lips, but before he

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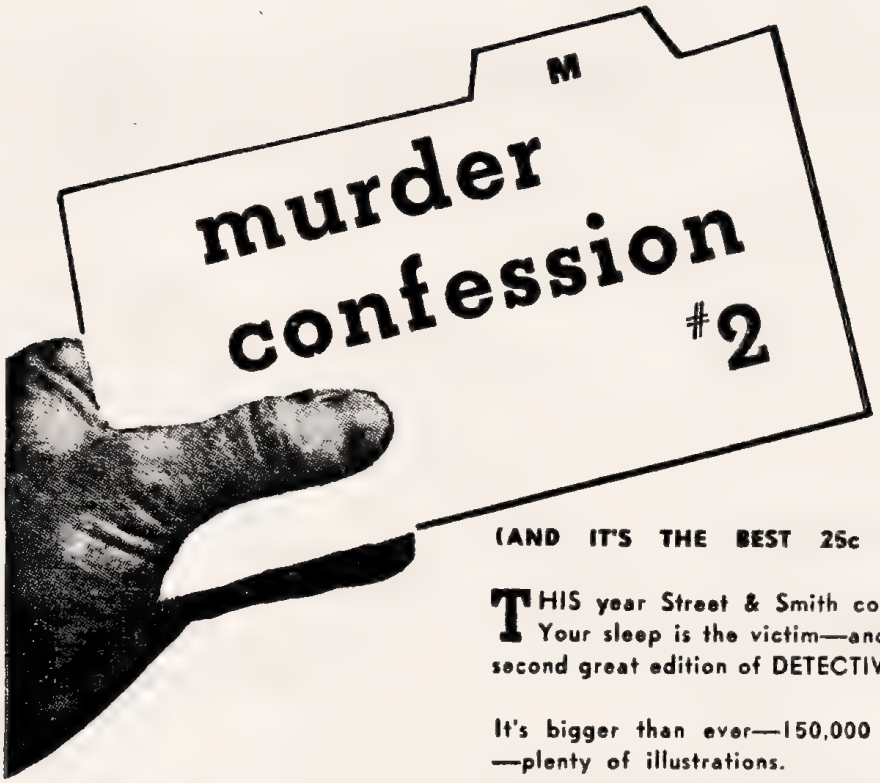
That was no ordinary freight wagon that Mike drove out of the Trace—it was a dead man's outfit, and anyone who touched it was a marked man.



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could voice it the fat man ducked back inside and slammed the door.

Mike blinked. "You'd think I'd horns!" he muttered.

His back was toward the house as he watered and turned the mules into the corral for a roll, but the sixth sense developed by men who live close to danger told him that eyes behind the rock walls were watching his every move.

The knowledge made him angry, but caution laid a restraining hand on his nerves.

"Mebbe, Mike Valley," he told himself acidly, "you'd better play your cards close to your belly until you learn what kind of game you're sittin' in. 'Tain't every jasper who rides to Californy with a dead man for freight!"

Along the far side of the inclosure a rolling mule kicked a rail from the corral. Mike headed around to fix it, and, as he circled the fence, he had the feeling that eyes inside the station had increased their intent surveillance of him. A second later he saw why he was being watched. There were men inside the rock house who hadn't wanted him to see the mound of freshly turned sand alongside a high saguaro cactus behind the corral.

A mound of sand shaped like a grave!

CHAPTER II

OASIS TRAP

MINUTES later, after washing up at the watering trough, Mike headed toward the way station. His hand was reaching for the door latch when the panel squeaked open in front of him. The pudgy little man blocked his way.

Mike halted, giving the other his look at a tall, bone-lean man in faded shirt and tattered corduroy. A four-day growth of black beard lay heavy on Mike Valley's flat cheeks. In that frame his direct gray eyes looked startlingly pale, and it was at his eyes the stationer stared the longest.

"I'm Frog Miller," he said. Then he shrugged. " 'Twon't do no good to say this, but if you were a smart man, you'd get ol' Sagebrush Perkins' drag-line team hitched up, and pull out."

The friendliness of the fat man was something Mike hadn't expected. A slow smile broke on his firm lips, showing the sharp whiteness of his teeth.

"Why?" he asked bluntly.

The stationer's eyes blinked. "Because Slant Corfew and three cronies have been watching you powerful close through the window."

Kindling anger inside him made Mike reach out and grip the stationer's pudgy arm. He was hungry, and he was tired, and he hated mystery and dead men. "I come on that wagon eight-ten miles back," he said quietly. "Perkins, if that's the driver's name, was dead with a bullet in the back and his mules needed water. I took care of them, and brung the wagon along. It ain't a danged bit more than any decent jasper would do. If this Corfew you've mentioned is curious, I'll tell him as much."

"Now don't get het up, stranger." The stationer dropped his voice. "What I'm tryin' to tell you is, it ain't healthy to be drivin' Donegal wagons right now."

Mike could feel the fat man's flesh quiver under his fingers. "Feller," he apologized with sudden gentleness, "I didn't aim to be rough with you—"

"It ain't that," the stationer protested. "I . . . I just don't like killin's around my place."

Mike grinned. "We kind o' see eye to eye on that, mister!"

"Then why don't you get the hell out of here?" the fat man asked with sudden violence. "Them four hombres in at the bar are going to kill you dead as—"

"Did you say *four* men?" Mike asked gently. "There's *five* horses outside, and one fresh grave by the corral. You wouldn't know nothing about that?"

Before the stationer could answer, a shout came from the room opening left of the hall. "Frog," someone yelled. "Come in here."

The stationer's face paled to the hue of tallow. "Go on," he urged. "*Vamoose*. I'll hold 'em—"

Mike felt a sudden liking for the pudgy man. He stepped into the hall. "You go rustle me a bait of grub, amigo," he said gruffly, "and don't worry about having to feed it to the birds. I ain't hankerin' to change my address to Boothill."

On legs that had regained their spring, Mike moved along the corridor. "Mebbe," he said softly, as though he were speaking to someone, "I'll pay back that blood debt afore I figgered!"

He moved into the tavern room, and a glance was all he needed to type the four men down at the other end. He'd seen many like them in frontier cow towns. They were garbed in the rough, loose clothes of mule skinners, but Mike doubted if a one of the quartet had ever tooled a wagon over the blistering Trace from San Berdoo to Prescott. Their hands were too supple; hands trained to grip Colts instead of jerk lines.

WITH an easy stride, Mike moved toward the bar. "Yore friend, Frog," he drawled with an ironically cocked dark eyebrow, "didn't hear you call. He's rustling me a bait of grub. While he's at it, will any of you gents join me in a little drink?"

He paused against one corner of the bar with the foursome stretched to his right.

The big, florid man nearest Mike seemed to be the leader of the quartet. He was probably the one the stationer had called Corfew.

At his invitation, the man twisted to face Valley. "We don't," he said deliberately, as Mike poured liquor for himself, "drink with Donegal drivers. And Donegal drivers don't drink in the same room with Kimbrough skinners!" His hand swept out and knocked the glass from Mike's fingers.

Mike turned slowly, eyebrow still cocked, and the very slowness of his move brought a grin to the other's lips. But the grin faded on an expelled breath.

Slant Corfew had been watching Mike Valley's calm face—and empty hands. He hadn't seen the boot that came up from the floor like a battering-ram to land in the pit of his stomach and propel him backward.

Corfew banged into the man behind him, and the shock went down the line. Like nine pins in a row, the four men went over in a cursing, clawing tangle that made the walls creak.

Out of the corner of his eye, Mike caught a glimpse of the stationer's frightened face peering at him through burlap curtains hung from a side entrance behind the bar. The reverberating crash of the foursome's fall had brought Frog on the run.

Sand shaken from the brush roof overhead was still sifting down on Mike's close-cropped curly hair when the navy Colt at his side streaked into his hand. He could have shot the Kimbrough skinners as they lay, but the bitter thought came to him

Continued on page 96

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Continued from page 94

that the Arizona Trace had seen enough dead men for one day.

"Stay put, you jaspers," he said warningly. "I ain't been working for Donegal long; fact is, he don't even know I am working for him yet, but that ain't going to keep me from asking you buscaderos a few questions. First off, though," he added, "you'd better come out and draw these hombres' fangs, Frog. I've heard of rattlesnakes gettin' mad enough to bite themselves. These hombres look just about that sore right now—and I'd sure hate to have to bury any of 'em with nothin' better than an ornery saguaro cactus for a tombstone."

Frog Miller looked sick. His hands were trembling when he came from behind the bar, and bent over the Kimbrough men.

"Now, Slant," he muttered placatingly, "you can see I'm doin' this just 'cause I have to. You know I ain't got nothin' agin' you and Kimbrough. 'Sall right with me if you and Scarf wanta change the name of this Hell's Highway from the Arizona Trace to Kimbrough's Road. It don't make a doggone bit of difference to me whose outfits I serve, long as I get the business. Yes, sir, you can chase all of Donegal's wagons off the Trace, if you want."

"Shut yore trap!" Corfew snapped.

Mike knew that Miller was doing his best to tell him of the trouble that had left one dead man for the buzzards and buried another with a saguaro cactus to mark his grave. Plain as could be, the stationer was warning him that he had lined himself up on the wrong side of a freighter's war for control of the rich Arizona trade.

Mike's sardonic smile flickered across his lips at the thought. That old jinx star had turned the trick again.

CHAPTER III

TRAP FOR A MULE SKINNER

FROG MILLER brought the gathered weapons to the bar and laid them down. "Now what?" he asked.

"Now nothing," Mike answered. He looked down his gun at Corfew, who had twisted to one elbow and was glaring at him. "I'll spend my words on these gents. Slant," he went on calmly, "this old Sagebrush Perkins now. Did he manage to plug yore fifth man afore you bushwhacked him?"

Corfew's face turned ugly. "Mister," he said quietly, "you're playing pretty rough. Don't store up any more trouble for yourself."

Mike chuckled. "Slant, trouble has been doggin' my footsteps so long, we're mighty close side-kicks. Now I'd hate to have to dig that corpse out of the sand and cart it clear to San Berdoo for the sheriff to look at. So you'd better do some talking."

Corfew sat erect. His mouth turned bitter. "We lost Hank when a bunch of Piutes jumped us out in the Sink," he said flatly. "If you want a different story, you better see Kimbrough. Now, we're getting out of here."

He climbed to his feet, and the three nondescript men with him followed. They all stood glowering at Mike's Colt. Mike waved the barrel at them lazily.

"Go ahead," he drawled. "What's stopping you?"

"How about our guns?" Corfew asked.

Mike's eyebrow swept up again. "You ain't likely to meet any Piutes 'tween here and San Berdoo."

Corfew shrugged. "You're swingin' a wide loop, friend," he said and

started for the door. "Don't let it trip you!"

"I been tripped before," Mike murmured. "Adios, boys."

From the front door he watched them shuffle across the yard to their horses, tighten cinches and swing aboard. They rode off without a backward glance.

FIVE days later, Mike Valley curved Sagebrush Perkins' jerkline team toward the eastern end of San Bernardino's main street. Behind him lay the Salton Sink and San Gorgonio Pass, where, singlehanded, he had buried the old mule skinner. Pudgy Frog Miller at Oasis Springs had suggested the location with a husky catch in his throat.

"Ol' Sagebrush," Miller had said, "allus told me he'd like to be buried at the top of San Gorgonio, so's he could lay thar in peace and listen to the skinners cussin' their broncs and canaries over the hump."

And, with a catch in his own throat, Mike had observed the old jerk liner's last wish. He'd piled rocks over the shallow grave so the coyotes couldn't dig out the body, and then he'd come on again, down the corkscrew road.

Now he was at the gateway of southern California's frontier metropolis. Horses, mule teams and burros lined the hitch rails at the edge of the boardwalks. Men by the score were crisscrossing the ankle-deep dust of the street. Mike was surprised at the activity, and yet he knew this was the outfitting point for the thousands of treasure hunters who were trying to wrest golden secrets from desert mountains and washes. Here, too, was the transshipping point for tons of supplies heading toward Mormon Utah and the Nevada gold fields. San Berdoo was like some great heart pumping men instead of blood to all points of a vast, untamed frontier.

"You'd think with all these people around," Mike muttered, "that Donegal could have hired plenty of skinners. He must have a hoodoo followin' him around bad as mine!"

A blacksmith hammer rang crisply inside a little shop to the right, and Mike saw two men look up from a game of pinochle. Instinct told him they had been waiting his arrival.

At first Mike though they might be Donegal men, and then, as they stepped to the street, the puffy breeze blowing down from the high San Jacintos snapped open the stockier man's vest, showing a silver star pinned to a plaid shirt.

"Rein down there, skinner." The words came as a harsh command.

Mike gentled his team to a halt. This was probably a routine inspection of all incoming wagons, he thought, and then he knew different for the stocky deputy had snaked his Colt from holster leather. Mike stiffened as the gun swung up to center him.

"Now, listen," he began, "you got no call to get so tough."

The deputy's cleanly shaven jowls gleamed like blue steel. "Climb out o' that saddle," he ordered. "The sheriff's going to have a few questions to ask you about how come you're driving a Donegal wagon usually skunned by Sagebrush Perkins."

Mike relaxed. He caught the horn and swung down stiffly. "That's just fine," he said heartily. "But how about Perkins' wagon? We can't leave it here blockin' traffic."

"Bones will take it to Donegal's yard," the deputy said easily. He gestured at the slatlike, lantern-jawed man who had followed him from the blacksmith shop. "Now come along." He reached for the navy Colt at Valley's hip.

Mike moved out of reach. He peered blandly at the deputy. "Am I under arrest, friend?"

"Not yet," the deputy said meaningly.

"Then I'll just keep my gun," Mike told him calmly. "You wouldn't undress a man in broad daylight?"

Red mantled the deputy's jowls. "Keep it, then," he growled, "but don't go reaching for it."

Mike stampeded the saddle horses, and that proved to be a bad mistake!

MIKE tramped the boardwalk with his shorter companion a step behind him. A sign slung from the wooden awning of a two-story frame building ahead advertised the Pacific Hotel.

"The chief is sick abed," the deputy said. "We'll go up to his room.

Mike nodded and led the way inside. The odor of musty heat and stale cigar smoke filled the lobby. A few men were sprawled in armchairs, hats tilted over their faces, taking an afternoon siesta. None of them stirred as Mike started his climb toward the second floor. The deputy was at his heels.

"Number thirteen," he grunted. "Walk right in."

"I guess yore sheriff ain't superstitious," Mike observed idly.

The deputy at his heels laughed. Something about the laugh jarred Mike, but he didn't know why. He did know, though, that he would be glad to tell the sheriff that he'd better ask Slant Corfew some questions. He was thinking about what he would say as he pushed open the door of No. 13 and entered.

The room was warm and hot. Flies buzzed about the ceiling and about the washstand with basin and pitcher on it in one corner. Straight across the room, in front of an open window, was the bed. The man on it had a thin blanket pulled to his clean-shaven chin.

The outline of his broad, stocky body was sharp beneath the quilt. Mike felt an edge of puzzlement at the sight, as though he were seeing something that he should recognize and couldn't. He switched his gaze back to the man's face—a bony, hard face with lines slashed deeply from

the inner curve of his nostrils to the corners of his ruthless mouth.

The man's eyes were a sooty, intolerant black. They swept the alkalaied length of Mike's body.

"This the hombre, Lou?" he asked quietly.

"The one, chief," the deputy said.

The man on the bed gestured at a single, straight-backed chair. "Set down, Mr.—"

"Valley," Mike said, and blinked. "Mike Valley, and I'll just kind o' prowl around, if that's all right with you, sheriff, and get the kinks out of my legs."

There was something wrong here. Mike knew it now, and his eyes turned smoky. The question asked by the man on the bed had given away the fact that he had known Mike was coming to San Berdoo. And the only four men who could have spread that news were Slant Corfew and his cronies.

"Boss," the deputy said, "this hombre come wheeling old Sagebrush Perkins' wagon into town, and Sagebrush warn't along."

"What happened to him, stranger?" asked the man in the bed.

Mike ambled casually toward the washstand. "Somebody shot him in the back out in the Sink, and I come across his wagon and brought it on in. There was nothin' in the wagon worth stealing," he went on calmly, "but I learned at Oasis Springs that Donegal and some hombre named Kimbrough are fighting to see who is going to haul all the freight to Prescott."

The pitcher was full of lukewarm water. Mike sloshed some into the chinaware basin, and started to roll up his sleeves. He could hear the deputy close behind him, and a picture came before his eyes of the small round bullet hole that had punched the life from Sagebrush.

"You got any idee of who might have killed Perkins?" the man on the bed asked carefully.

"Yeah." Mike looked blandly over his shoulder, and dropped his hands to grip the edges of the basin. "I figger Slant Corfew had a lot to do with it. Him and this polecat Scarf Kimbrough!"

The man on the bed smiled with his lips. "So you think Scarf Kimbrough's a polecat?"

"Any man," Mike said flatly, "who tries to hog things by killing and thieving is a polecat!"

"Them sentiments," the other said, "will look nice carved on your tombstone!"

Mike's knuckles were white on the washbasin. "Kimbrough," he drawled, "you'll find out afore you're done with me, I ain't so easy got rid of."

HE saw the other's face freeze with surprise at being identified, and took that instant to hurl the basin of water across his shoulder. He heard a strangled oath behind him, and the boom of a gun. Lead intended for Mike's back smashed the pitcher on the stand as he whirled, his balled fist crashing full into the deputy's dripping face. The man grunted with pain. He slashed blindly at Mike with the long barrel of his Colt, and missed. Then the deputy's other fist caught Mike in the mouth.

Mike ducked, and charged, tasting blood. He caught Lou under the breastbone with the top of his head, and the man caromed back against the wall and sprawled down. His gun bucked out of his hand, and skidded across the floor.

Mike dove for the weapon, and lead whistled over his head. Kimbrough had gone out of the bed on the opposite side. Mike could see

nothing but the mask of the man's face through gun smoke. He thumbed a shot from Lou's gun at Kimbrough and grabbed for the doorknob. A bullet hole appeared beside his fingers as he yanked the portal open. He snapped another shot at Kimbrough, and ducked, slamming the door behind him.

Out in front of the Pacific other guns had just finished their talk. The echo of the shooting came wafting in to Mike almost like the finished reverberations of their own fight.

"Now, what in thunder?" he asked himself.

There was no rear door at the back of the long hotel corridor. It left the lobby as the only exit. Remembering those loungers having their siesta downstairs, Mike threw Lou's Colt aside, and brought his own weapon from leather. The feel of it was good in his hand as he went down the stairs.

But by the time he was halfway to the bottom he could see that the lobby was empty. Those gunshots on the street had drawn all the loiterers.

Mike moved outside with his gun back in leather. The bright sun, after the dimness of the hotel, struck at his eyes, and for a minute he caught only a confused picture of a bunch of men milling about a big freight wagon halted in the center of the street. A rider was in the nigh wheeler's saddle, and there were a couple more men in the bed of the wagon. They were standing at the front end where they had rolled back the canopy. One of them had a bull whip looped about his neck.

Mike blinked rapidly to adjust his vision. The first thing he recognized was the mouse-colored mules and rickety freighter. It was Sagebrush Perkins' outfit!

The man on the nigh wheeler was Slant Corfew, reins in one hand, smoking Colt in the other. The pair in the wagon were two of the stubble-faced hombres who'd been with Corfew at Oasis Springs.

In the center of the street a white-haired man was sprawled on all fours. Mike realized that he was looking at Tom Donegal. That shock of white hair and fighting Irish face was more than enough to identify the owner of the Fireball Express Line.

Standing over the sprawled man was a tall, willowy girl. Red Irish hair tumbled in disarray about her forehead. Her features, more delicate in molding, were the same as Tom Donegal's.

Hands on her hips, she faced the gaping crowd. Blue eyes blazing, she framed scorching words. "Isn't there a *man* in this whole bunch?" she demanded. "One brave enough to help my father to a doctor? Of course, I *know* you're all too afraid of Kimbrough, and these coyotes who work for him, to help us take possession of our wagon. You left that for one old man to do single-handed! Oh, you're a bunch of fine, upright citizens, all right! Standing there and letting a wagon and team be stolen right off the streets of your town!"

"This outfit wasn't stole, and I told your dad as much, Lynne Donegal," Slant Corfew said loudly. "We bought it off of Sagebrush Perkins when he got fed up working for your starvation pay. It ain't our fault if he took the *dinero* and headed for Nevady!"

Mike was skirting the crowd while all that talk blared forth. He had noticed that the townspeople drawn by the commotion were all gathered at the front end of the wagon. Even Corfew's cronies were looking ahead.

"I've always said," Mike Valley

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murmured, "that a gent's rear is his weakest point."

ON hands and knees he went over the tail gate. The crowd was making enough noise to drown the sound of his boots on the wagon bed. Quietly Mike stole forward, gun palmed.

One of Corfew's men had a bull whip looped about his neck. Mike picked him first because he wanted that whip. He swung the long barrel of the Colt in his hand.

The man was crumpling before his companion realized that there was anyone in the wagon. Mike caught a glimpse of the other's startled face, and that worthy was never to forget the glimpse he had of Valley's wicked grin as the latter's flickering Colt slammed him into unconsciousness.

Still moving fast, Mike caught each man by an arm. He dragged them to the rear of the wagon, and tumbled them out like sacks of grain. Returning to the front, he caught up the bull whip.

The silken thong on the end of it was flickering out before the popeyed crowd in the street realized what was happening. And Slant Corfew's first realization that all was not well came when something that burned like a branding iron caught him across the tight seat of his pants.

Mike swung the whip a second time, with relish, as Corfew twisted in the saddle. The man's mouth sagged as he glimpsed Mike Valley's black-bearded face.

The second stroke of the whip seemed to lift Corfew right out of the nigh wheeler's saddle. Arm and legs flailing, Kimbrough's segundo lit on all fours in the street, and once again the seat of his pants was exposed to that darting lash. Mike caught him a third time, and cloth ripped. Howling, Corfew made his feet. He headed at a frenzied run toward the Pacific Hotel, and the roaring laughter of the crowd behind him hurt worse than the sting of the whip.

Mike vaulted to the ground. He was up in the nigh wheeler's saddle and swinging the wagon alongside Lynne Donegal and her fallen father before the laughter ceased.

"All right," he threw at a couple of guffawing citizens. "Get Donegal inside the wagon. Somebody else run tell a sawbones we're coming his way."

A new star was rising in San Berdoo. There were many willing hands now to aid the Donegals. Lynne Donegal came alongside Mike and the look of appreciation in her eyes was more than enough pay for what he had done.

"I . . . I can't thank you—" she began.

Mike cut her short. His face was suddenly grim. "Ma'am," he said, "you better save your thanks until we see if we can make 'em stick!"

CHAPTER IV

LONG HAUL TO HELL

IT was close to midnight before old Dr. Skelly pronounced Tom Donegal out of danger. Corfew's bullet had slid between two of the old freighter's ribs, but the wound was a clean one.

"A couple of weeks," the doctor said, "and you'll be better than ever, you ornery old shorthorn. Do you good to stay in bed that long, anyway. Give you a chance to catch up on some of the sleep you been losing."

For a wounded man who'd lost a lot of blood, Tom Donegal's voice was surprisingly rich and full. "But hod-dang it, Skelly," he roared, "I

cain't straddle a bed for no two weeks. Seagull Simpson is out in the yard right now readying a train to pull out at dawn, and I gotta—"

"You've got to stay in bed," the doctor said sternly. His eyes passed over Mike Valley, who was lounging in complete comfort in a Morris chair near the foot of the bed. "Turn this young wild cat loose in your place. Why, that whippin' he gave Slant Corfew today has got everybody in town laughing. One trick like that is worth a peck of spent lead!"

After the doctor had taken his leave, Tom Donegal looked down the length of the bed at Mike. They were alone in the cubbylike bedroom of a little shack built alongside the entrance to the Fireball wagon yard. The front half of the house served as the line's office, while this rear part had been converted into living quarters.

Mike could hear Lynne Donegal in the kitchen, and his nose wrinkled at the appetizing odors coming from there. It made him conscious of the fact that he was wolf hungry. He was also conscious that shaggy-haired old Tom Donegal was studying him, and he endured the scrutiny without appearing to notice as he built and lit a cigarette. During the hours that the doctor had been here working over Tom Donegal, Mike had kept the express line owner's mind occupied with a running account of all that had happened since he had first seen that pair of buzzards coasting over Sagebrush Perkins' death wagon.

Now Donegal was the one to break the silence. "Valley," he began, "it ain't once in a coon's age that I cotton to a gent like I have to you. On account of that I ain't going to offer you a job. You're too good a man to get yourself killed trying to help pull a broken-down outfit like mine up by the boot straps. Only thing I can do is offer you pay for what you've done already, and advise you to climb that bay pony of yours and keep heading west. Git as far away from San Berdoo and Kimbrough as you can, because if you don't, that back-shootin' polecat'll plant you sure as tomorrow.

"There ain't a thing you can do here to help me," the freighter continued. "What happened today proves it. That blue-jawed feller, Morrel, who took you to the Pacific Hotel, is Sheriff Abe Gorman's deputy. Which means the law's gone over to Kimbrough at last. And with the law puttin' blinders on its eyes, Kimbrough can import enough gun toters to blow my outfits right off the Trace. The caravan o' ten wagons I got set to pull out tomorrer morning will be my last run to Prescott. When they git back, I'll sell out to Kimbrough for what he'll pay, and hope he'll give me enough to go to San Francisco and start some little draying business up there."

Mike took the cigarette from his lips, but Donegal went on before he could speak.

"Nope, son," the Irishman's voice sounded tired now. "I've done made up my mind. I cain't ask drivers to go out and risk getting shot out of their saddles for fifty dollars a month. And I cain't pay more. Kimbrough starves his mules to pay fighting wages to his gun crew, but I'm hanged if I'll do it. 'Tain't the fault of the broncs and canaries that me 'n' Kimbrough are fighting!"

Mike had listened to Donegal's talk with more surprise than he'd felt in a long time. "It ain't like a fighting old Irish war horse to quit the scrap when the battle's half won," he said now.

HE saw Donegal start to rear up, then fall back with a groan.

"If I wasn't crippled up, I'd make you swaller those words, young feller," Donegal declared. "How in tarnation you can say the battle's half won is beyond me! I've cut the rate on the Fireball and Kimbrough's cut it on his Red Arrow outfit until neither of us can make money. That's why Kimbrough's fightin' me for a monopoly. If one of us had all the business, we could make a profit on turnover, but with two outfits dividing the freight, we'll both starve. So don't go tellin' me the battle's half won when it ain't. I'm quittin'!"

"You ain't quittin'," Mike said flatly. He flicked his cigarette accurately into a cuspidor by the door, and twisted to face Donegal. "Now you listen to me," he said. "I been chasin' rainbows since I was a kid old enough to fork a saddle and pack a gun. But, dang it, I got some kind of hard-luck star that guides me plumb into every ruckus where there ain't a chance to win. Looked at first like this was going to be the same thing over again, but I see different now. Mebbe you never done any freighting on the Salt Lake run, but I have. One outfit back there pulled a trick that brought more business than they could handle—and you can do the same thing here!"

Tom Donegal was sitting up now despite his wound. "You're a surprising jasper," he muttered. "What you got up your sleeve? Name me a way to whip Kimbrough and I'll cut you in on the profits."

Mike's tough mouth quirked. "I ain't interested in the profits. I'm interested in winning a war."

"You're plain, plumb loco!" Donegal chuckled, but his eyes warmed for the younger man. "Spill your piece, son."

Mike Valley nodded. "Now you listen, and listen close," he said earnestly. "Way it stacks up now, I figger your wagons are carrying around a thousand pounds of freight per mule, plus five hundred pounds of feed. You load all that feed here and carry enough to last you clean to Prescott and back again. That's nothin' but plain, dumb foolishness. As it stands, you only carry a pay load one way. So here's my idee. At the end of this run to Prescott, tell your segundo, Seagull Simpson, to buy up all the grain your wagons will carry. Cache it along the Trace at each camp site."

Tom Donegal's faded blue eyes had started to sparkle. He hammered one fist excitedly into the palm of the other hand. "By the great horn spoon, you got something!" he ejaculated. "Why in tarnation ain't I never thought of doing that before this? Jumpin' Jehoshaphat, man, that'll let me slash rates, and carry two ton and a half more pay load per wagon than I can now!"

"That's what they done around Salt Lake," Mike agreed. "Worked out right well."

Donegal sagged back against the pillows. "But what about Kimbrough?" he groaned. "Son, you give me some hope there for a few minutes, but it won't work. I was planning on calling Kimbrough in, and making a bargain with him that if he'd let my wagons go to Prescott and back with the contract load I got in the yard now, why, I'd sell lock, stock and barrel when the wagons got back."

"You're still going to tell Kimbrough that," Mike drawled. "Only in the agreement you sign you got to put a clause that if any of his hooligans so much as lay a finger on one of your wagons whether going or coming *this* trip, why, the deal's off."

"Natcherly he ain't going to bust up wagons that he knows are going to be his inside of thirty days," Donegal grunted.

Mike Valley's eyebrow quirked. "He ain't," he drawled, "but *I am!*"

Donegal blinked. "I don't foller you, Valley," he blurted.

Mike grinned. "It won't be a danged bit worse for me to saw an axle in the Sink and blame it on Kimbrough, than it is for his hooligans to grease your brake shoes and plug your drivers."

"Which voids the agreement I'll sign with him." Donegal's own lips were smiling now. "So we're going to fight fire with fire, huh? Well, Valley, if we can just make your scheme stick for about half a dozen runs with an extra thirty ton of freight per trip, I'll give Kimbrough the danged Trace with my blessing!"

Lynne Donegal came from the kitchen then with a tray of food and her eyes began to sparkle as her father told of the plan Mike Valley had suggested.

"If we can just keep Kimbrough guessing and string him along for a while," Donegal finished, "we'll head for San Francisco, Lynne, and a decent place for a gal to live."

Mike had been watching Lynne as her father talked, and he saw her eyes lose their sparkle as old Tom voiced what was evidently a cherished dream. The knowledge that the girl had no particular desire to leave this wild frontier town made Mike obscurely glad. Then he pushed that feeling out of his mind. A saddle tramp with nothing but lonely camps and short-handed fights behind him shouldn't be thinking such thoughts. He was a rolling stone, and that was the bitter truth. The trail stretched lonely behind him, and once he'd done his bit here, it would stretch on again until that unlucky star guiding his destiny moved him in front of one too many bullets.

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He caught the girl's warm eyes on him, and saw the smile that curved her soft lips. "Why, Mr. Valley," she said, "for a man who's just brought us something to hope for, you don't look very happy."

Mike blinked, and he felt low as a lizard. "Mebbe," he returned, "I feel kind o' bad because things seem to be working out too easy."

THE days after that were busy ones for Mike, but in the quiet of the night, after bone-shaking hours on the back of a Missouri mule, that dull sense of depression often returned. Irritably he pushed the feeling aside, because there was no reason for it. Everything was going fine.

A runner had brought them word at San Gorgonio that Scarf Kimbrough had met Tom Donegal's offer to buy the Fireball Express Line on their return from Prescott. And men who were capable mule skinners and fair hands with Colts and rifles breathed easier.

Some curiosity was evinced when Seagull Simpson, a gaunt, phlegmatic old-timer who could slit a throat without changing his sour expression, loaded the wagons with grain for the return trip to San Berdoo. The curiosity changed to grumbling when the men found that pits had to be dug at each camp site and the grain carefully buried.

All the long four hundred miles of the return trip sacks of fodder were buried at each camp. And as they reached Oasis Springs, Mike had a word for all of the teamsters before they washed up and headed for the delights of Frog Miller's tavern room.

Leaning easily against the watering trough, Mike faced the crew. "Boys," he said quietly, "there's just one request I got to make of you. Me 'n' Seagull don't give a hoot how drunk you get, either here or in San Berdoo. But if a one of you gents

ever spills the word that we've done cached hoss feed along the Trace, I'll come after you, personal. I ain't much of a hand at killin', but the man who talks can be mighty certain he's going to die! That's all. Go have your fun. You've earned it!"

The drivers trooped off to the station, but they were a pretty sober lot. There wasn't a one of them who had any wish to tangle with Mike Valley.

It grew thoroughly apparent, however, before the night was out, that Mike Valley was determined to follow out the advice he had given the rest of them. He outswore and outdrank the teamsters, and he ended in an apparently sodden state of drunkenness draped in a rawhide chair, his head cradled in his arms across a table.

When Seagull Simpson herded the rest of the crew out for a few hours' sleep before it was time to catch up in the morning, his comments concerning Mike Valley were sulphurous.

"Let the blasted cuss set right there, Frog," Seagull warned the stationer. "Close up and go on to bed and don't tech him. If he's too drunk to walk to the wagons, he can set in that danged chair, and I hope he grows that way. He'll wisht he hadn't got so gay when it comes time to hitch up in the morning!"

Mike, deep in supposedly drunken slumber, grinned. He listened to the sound of boots recede, and an hour later with nothing but the pale starlight to cast a sheen over the tops of covered freighters he unbarred a tavern shutter and crawled through the window.

When he returned an hour later and carefully shuttered the window behind him, there was resin on his hands that he had used to seal the cut he'd made on the rear axle of Seagull Simpson's wagon.

SIX days later seven men gathered in Sheriff Abe Gorman's jail office. The sheriff, a round-faced, paunchy individual, and his blue-jowled deputy, Morrel, were there, but they seemed at a loss as to just what they should do. Arrayed alongside of them was Scarf Kimbrough and Slant Corfew, looking excited and pretty well dumfounded. Facing that quartet was Tom Donegal, his heavy head of white hair almost bristling with indignation. Seagull Simpson, his mouth looking as sour as though he'd just bit into a lemon, was with his chief. Mike Valley stood between them, eyebrow cocked ironically.

Donegal was thrusting one finger at a paper held in his other hand. "Sheriff," he thundered, "you witnessed this here docyment yourself, so you know it's legal and binding. Kimbrough's done busted it, so ain't I right in chargin' *you* with the job of seeing that no more of my wagons are molested until this here agreement can be carried out according to its dictates? Looks, dang it, like we cain't even trust Kimbrough to do hisself a good turn!"

"Just like rattlers I've seen get so mad they bite their own tails," Mike murmured.

Scarf Kimbrough came away from the wall with a growl of rage. The wattles along his sagging jowls were shaking impotently as he paused before long Mike Valley.

"Sheriff," Kimbrough thundered, "if anybody cut that axle on Donegal's wagon it was this lanky cuss here. He ain't done a thing but cause us all trouble since he come to this country!"

Mike grinned. He was enjoying himself. "You've caused me a little

yourself," he said mildly. "Besides, you got to prove I cut that axle."

"You know blasted well we can't prove anything!" snapped Kimbrough.

"The burden of proof rests with you, Donegal," Sheriff Gorman sputtered.

"Oh, we ain't goin' to try and prove Mr. Kimbrough cut the axle," Mike said calmly. "We're just pointin' out that on account of it happenin', the agreement Mr. Donegal signed is no good. Now we all know that Mr. Donegal is plumb anxious to sell out to Mr. Kimbrough—said Kimbrough having the dinero to hire a bunch of gun-slingers to shoot folks like Sagebrush Perkins in the back. Mr. Donegal ain't got enough mazuma to hire gents to return the compliment, so said Kimbrough wins this war—*but not until we make a trip to Prescott and back without no dead men for baggage or greased brake shoes, or cut axles!*"

The sheriff looked helplessly at Mike's bland face, then turned his gaze to Kimbrough. "Scarf," he said gruffly, "I guess you better tell that crew of yours to mind their knitting."

Later, when they were alone in the Fireball office, Tom Donegal brought a bottle and glasses from a drawer of his desk. "Boys," he drawled to Mike and Seagull, "if this don't call for a celebration, nothin' does! I ain't never seen the beat of the jackpot Kimbrough's worked hisself into with the help of Mike here. Son, I hope you ain't forgettin' that a share of the profits on the next run through will be yours. And with the heap of freight that's stacked to go out in the yard, yore end will be a neat pile, too!"

Mike didn't say anything. There was no use telling Tom Donegal that the feeling had come over him during the blistering days on the Trace that this was his last war. Either he'd help Tom Donegal win this lost-cause fight or the hoodoo star that had guided his destiny would see him in his grave. He felt Lynne Donegal's eyes on him as she came through an inner door and sensed that she more than half-guessed the thoughts running through his mind.

Tom Donegal was talking on again. "You'll pull right back out soon as the yard bunch can get the wagons loaded," he said. "And this time they'll carry thirty tons of extra freight, thanks to Mike!"

CHAPTER V

HOT-LEAD WELCOME

THANKS to Mike. And Mike Valley heard ironic laughter ring from his own lips. A week had gone since Tom Donegal had spoken those words in his office, and yet now as Mike looked at the empty feed cache alongside the Trace they came back as fresh as though just voiced. With the memory of that praise came the bitter realization that success had made him careless.

He'd considered one warning to the teamsters concerning these hidden caches of grain enough. Now he could see that was where he had made his mistake. For there had been a slip up. The yawning cache proved it.

Slowly Mike's eyes swept back to the high barrier of iron mountains behind them now. Against the early-evening sky, he could pick out the notch of San Gorgonio Pass—a pass mules could never recross without food!

Once again, like a man hoping he'd misread the sign, he looked down at the empty hole at his feet. In the bottom of the pit a few grains of barley had spilled from a poorly sewn

sack. With a new thought in his mind, Mike dropped into the hole. He caught up a handful of the spilled barley and touched his tongue to the grain. Then he chewed a bit of it.

When he spat it out, and looked up at the ring of stunned teamsters gathered about the empty cache, his eyes were smoky. "Kimbrough's bunch didn't beat us here by more than twelve hours," he said crisply. "The stuff I just been chewing has still got a little moisture left in it."

Lugubrious Seagull Simpson gave Mike a hand out of the pit. "You're intimatin' that—" he began.

"I ain't intimatin' anything," Mike interrupted. "Facts is facts. Kimbrough's outfit ain't more'n twelve hours ahead of us." He looked back at San Gorgonio Pass, then his eyes passed over the line of great covered freighters circled about their usual camp site. Inside those ten wagons was close to a hundred thousand dollars' worth of merchandise that would rot here or fall into Kimbrough's hands unless the mules were fed soon. If either eventuality occurred it meant ruin for old Tom Donegal and a red-headed girl.

"*An' it's nobody's fault but my own*," Mike thought, "*which puts it up to me to change the picture.*"

Seagull Simpson moved close to Mike. He gestured toward the teamsters straggling back to their dry camp. Many of the men were muttering wrathfully under their breath.

"It don't look good, Valley," Simpson said softly. "If you don't pull a rabbit out of yore hat danged pronto, we're going to be minus some mule skinners. They ain't going to set out here in the sun and wait for a messenger to ride back to San Berdoo with word for Tom to send extry wagons with grain. Kimbrough's probably got the pass blocked, anyway, so a rider couldn't get through. And even if one did make it, I doubt if fodder could be got back here fast

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enough to do us any good. Oh, Kimbrough shore done a good job of puttin' us behind the eight ball.

"Why, dang it!" Seagull went on with angry vehemence, "we're stuck six ways from a deuce, and when Kimbrough gits done with us this time, Tom can tear up that agreement of his. It won't be worth the paper it's writ on—which is about one *centavo* more than Tom'll have to his name!"

MIKE felt himself warming to the Fireball's grizzled ramrod. There was no word of recrimination. Seagull Simpson was willing to accept his share of responsibility for what had happened. But knowing that didn't ease the ache in Mike Valley's heart.

He turned to peer silently for a moment at the wheel marks of the Trace, stretching away across the salt flats and sand dunes. The opalescent beauty of sunset shrouded the Sink now. Beauty to make a man forget the glaring, killing heat of the daytime.

His hand dropping to rub the cherry-wood butts of his Colt, Mike spoke out of the silence. "Oasis Springs is two days' drive away," he said abstractedly, like a man talking to himself. "We got water, and the mules can last that far if we hitch up, and drive straight through tonight and into tomorrer."

"You gambling that mebbe the cache we left at Frog Miller's won't be teched?" Seagull Simpson asked.

Mike's tough mouth curved ironically. "Feller," he said gently, "I'm gambling that there'll be *mucho* grain at the Oasis."

Seagull Simpson's faded eyes began to widen as he caught the train of Valley's thought. "You figger Kimbrough took the barley he lifted from this cache and the next one to the Springs?"

Mike nodded.

"If he did," Simpson's voice dropped to a pur, "it means he'll figger on our trying to reach the Springs. And if he figgers thataway, he'll be waiting there to greet our train with a hot-lead welcome. Valley, this is his last play. He's goin' drivin' and lose, we'll be handing him whole hog or none. And if we keep a hundred thousand dollars' wuth of freight and thuty thousand wuth of wagons and mules on a silver platter. Now if we turn back soon as the men eat—"

"We'll founder every mule climbin' San Gorgonio!" Mike said impatiently. "Nope, we either got to fish or cut bait, feller. Now me, I've run more'n one bluff with my last blue chip."

Seagull Simpson grinned sourly. "Yeah, and how many of 'em you made stick?"

Mike's ironic grin matched Simpson's. "Not many. But a feller's got to keep trying!"

THEIR mounts were staggering under them when the squat outline of the Oasis Springs station appeared like a black scar against the phosphoruslike sheen of the Sink ahead.

Four hours of hard riding lay behind Mike Valley and the Fireball segundo now. Hours that would quadruple in length before the long wagon train coming on behind them would reach here. In his mind's eye Mike could see those wagons crawling across the shimmering sands like a long, disjointed serpent. Wagons on which old Tom Donegal and a red-headed girl had pinned their hopes. "Hopes that I got to make come true," Mike thought grimly.

"What you aimin' to do, now that we're here?" Seagull asked sourly as Mike reined in just below the crest of a dune ahead.

Mike gave Simpson a long look. "Whittle," he said quietly. "You

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know how to yell like a Piute?"

A surprised chuckle broke from the Fireball segundo's throat. With a calloused thumb he whetted the blade of a big bowie thrust through his belt. "Son," he drawled, "I can outyelp any desert varmint that ever lived!"

Mike grinned and swung down from his tired bay. He tied the animal loosely to a mesquite tree growing alongside the Trace. "If we don't come back," he said softly, "these critters can pull loose when they get thirsty enough."

From there on they traveled on foot. Mike led the way, circling, to come in on the station at an angle. Knowing men to be creatures of habit, he led the way toward the clump of tamarisk and date trees, growing thickly about the oasis springs, for he remembered that Corfew had once used the hitch rail there for his mount and those of his men. Likely the horses would be there now.

Mike was right in his surmise. As they stole beneath the thick shadows of the trees he caught the dim outline of six tethered mounts.

"Three apiece!" Seagull breathed. "The odds won't be as stiff as I'd figgered 'em!"

"Gunnies come high," Mike smiled in the darkness. "An' Kimbrough cain't trust the average run of his freighters to join this kind of dirty fight. I figger him and Corfew an' the three hombres I met here with Slant the first time count for five."

"Glory be," Simpson's whisper drifted to Valley. "The sixth hombre is that blue-jawed deputy, Morrel! I recognize his hoss."

Mike saw the pale flash of Simpson's bowie in the dark as the Fireball ramrod slashed the tie ropes of the horses. Freed, yet indecisive, the animals bunched together.

Mike's Colt swept into his hand. He fired twice into the ground, and threw the loading gate. Ramming fresh loads into the gun, he watched the startled horses snort and break into the clear.

"Now let's hear you yell like a Piute," he drawled. "We got to make Kimbrough and the rest of his hombres think a passel of Injuns are runnin' off their stock. That'll pull some of 'em out o' the station, and while they're lookin' around, we'll sashay in and give the rest a surprise."

Together their cries rent the night —short, wolfish howls, followed by one long-drawn howl of savage glee.

Mike's lips were parted to voice a second Piute cry of triumph, but the wolf yell of the desert warriors was never uttered. A chuckle coming from the thick black beneath the tamarisk choked the cry in his throat.

THAT shore sounds like Injuns, all right!" Scarf Kimbrough drawled. And then his voice hardened. "There's six guns got you boys covered, so don't get any notions. Valley," he went on, "we knew you'd come along and try to toll us out of the station, so we just saved you the trouble by coming to meet you."

Mike felt his stomach turn hollow. He saw bitterly now that he was not the only one who could figure the motives of men. Kimbrough had outguessed him from the start. Now they were in a patch of starlight striking down through the tall date palms, while Kimbrough and his men were blotted by the thick darkness beneath the tamarisk.

"We don't wanta kill you," the Red Arrow owner's voice came again. "So make it easy on yoreselves."

Mike stalled for time. "What you got up your sleeve this time, Scarf?"

Kimbrough chuckled. "A little chore for you boys. About tomorrow noon when that train of Donegal's comes in sight, we're expecting you to step into the yard and beckon 'em in. That way your drivers will figure you won this ruckus which will make takin' 'em easier than shootin' ducks in a gallery."

"Only," a voice that was thick with whiskey courage said from still deeper in the grove, "it ain't gonna work out thataway! All you hombres have been forgettin' ol' fat Frog. Ain't but two jaspers on this hull danged Trace ever treated him decent as far as that goes, and it's them I'm payin' off now. One was Sagebrush Perkins, and I'm settlin' his account by killin' you, Slant Corfew. You an' your braggin' tonight about how you shot him in the back! The other gent gettin' my thanks is that long drink of water, Mike Valley, standing out there under your guns. Speaking of guns, I got one myself. A twelve-gauge loaded with grape, and it's p'inted right at you an' your crew, Kimbrough. Yeah, you—"

But Red Arrow guns were already flaming before Frog Miller's maudlin speech was finished. Mike, too, was moving as soon as his shocked surprise at finding the fat man had turned warrior passed. He dove toward the tamarisks, and a root tripped him. As he fell, Mike felt the brush of lead through his curly hair.

Propped on elbow, he fired at the flash of the other's weapon, and heard a man scream hoarsely. But the cry was drowned by the giant roar of a twin-barreled shotgun. Buckshot sprayed like lethal hail through the tamarisks. Mike heard the bubbling screams of at least three men echo the shotgun's blast.

Seagull Simpson had rolled the other way, and now Mike saw his gun streak fire.

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Mike as the latter reared to his knees. The slashing barrel of a Colt caught Mike above the ear. Through a red mist, he saw Kimbrough. He tried to bring his own gun to bear on the Red Arrow owner, but the weapon felt heavier than rock. Kimbrough's Colt blazed almost in his face; hot powder burned into his skin.

The pain drove some of the fog from Mike's brain, and oddly enough in that flaming instant he seemed to see a star—a radiant, beautiful star. A star of hope framing the face of a red-headed girl.

Insight came to Mike all at once. The hoodoo star of destiny that had guided him into fighting lost-cause battles all the length of the West hadn't been a hoodoo star at all. It had just kept him moving on until the right time came to settle down—and a man couldn't do that alone!

Kimbrough was clawing at Mike. The man's bony knees crushed into Mike's chest, and his Colt barrel slashed again at Valley's head. Mike fired straight up, and felt Kimbrough's body collapse across him. Half smothered by the weight of the Red Arrow owner, he pushed the man aside, and staggered erect.

Nothing but silence met him, and then a voice growled: "That you, Valley? Sing out, or I'm shootin'—"

"You ain't the only one," Frog Miller added, and he sounded completely sober now. "I got this thing loaded again, and I might as well have two busted shoulders as one. Sing out!"

"It's me," Mike said, and the weariness and mist in his brain dropped away like a fog. "Yeah, it's me. I guess mebbe we'll be tolling our wagons in tomorrow like Kimbrough said—only the reception will be a whole lot different than he'd figured to give 'em!"

THE END.

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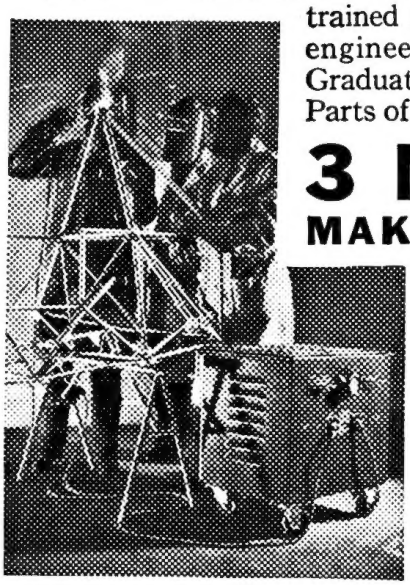

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